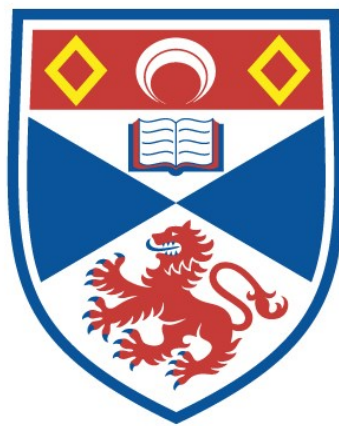


**VOICES IN THE CLANGOUR : THE SECOND WORLD
WAR THROUGH THE EYES OF SELECTED WOMEN
WRITERS IN BRITAIN AND ITALY**

Paola Sarli

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of MPhil
at the
University of St Andrews



1997

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IN BRITAIN AND ITALY

by
Paola Sarli

submitted in application for the degree of M.Phil.
University of St. Andrews
November 1995



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ABSTRACT

Since early times, many women have been aware that their vision of war is one of the elements marking their difference from the opposite sex. The Greek poetess Sappho was the first to express clearly the fact that the feminine view of the universe is informed with love, while war, weapons and the ideals of heroism and honour dominate the masculine world. It is traditionally accepted that, throughout the history of Western culture, from the very beginning to the present age, women--both as writers and as individuals--have generally assumed a peripheral role in wartime; nevertheless, in twentieth-century literary productions, their attitudes towards war appear to be far more "aware" and active than one might suspect. In particular, by reading women's works written during and about the Second World War, the signs of their development in war thought can be clearly seen. Even if love and sentiment have remained among the most common feminine feelings in wartime, a large number of women have put them into action, in order to help their men, their families and their countries in dangerous circumstances. Needless to say, female involvement--both "emotional" and "effective"--in war has been mirrored in written works belonging to different literary genres, as appears from even a first glance at some cultural European contexts--in this case the British and the Italian. The works of some British poetesses, a novel by the Italian Renata Viganò and the reports and memories of both British and Italian ordinary women--all produced during and dealing with the Second World War--offer adequate grounds for enquiring into the existence of a feminine dimension of war. The examination of two different geographical and cultural areas--instead of a single one--enables the discovery of the general features of women's war thought: in fact, while the obvious discrepancies might be basically ascribed to the peculiar events and aspects characterising our two countries, the affinities might be referred to the common circumstances and feelings experienced by contemporary women during wartime.

I, Paola Sarli, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 40,000 words in length, has been written by me, that is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

23 4. 97
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I was admitted as a research student in April 1994 and as a candidate for the degree of M.Phil. in November 1995; the higher study of which this is a record was carried out in the University of St. Andrews between 1994 and 1995.

23. 4. 97

I hereby certify that the candidate has fulfilled the conditions of the Resolution and Regulations appropriate for the degree of M.Phil. in the University of St. Andrews and that the candidate is qualified to submit this thesis in application for that degree.

30 April 1997

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PREFATORY NOTE

Throughout the text quotations from *L'Agnese va a morire* by Renata Viganò and from *Pane nero* by Miriam Mafai are in English accompanied by their Italian original in footnotes, while quotations from Italian secondary sources are given in translation only. All translations into English are the present writer's unless otherwise indicated.

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INTRODUCTION

1. War: Ancient and Contemporary views

From a first glance at any bookshop or newsagent in a railway station one is struck by the idea that the forge of history burns thanks to only two things: great characters and wars. This idea, far from being a simple suspicion, is indeed a matter of fact.... When these two elements interweave, creating a unique event--for example in a biography of Hitler or of Julius Caesar--the public response could not be greater.... Since Western culture started to look at the history of mankind from the perspective of power and war, war itself has become the leading character.¹

As has been noticed by Ernesto Galli della Loggia, war has played--and still plays--a relevant role in the complex of modern consciousness:

Since Thucydides, Western culture has considered human events from the perspective of the theme of power, which implies that power has become the interpretative key of history and war has become the main character of history itself.... Therefore the semantic area of war has inspired both the language concerning moral values and the metaphors connected to love.²

This accounts for the striking modernity of those literary products which--born in the warriors' age of ancient Greece--still represent a repertory of metaphors, images and *leit-motives* in European civilisation.³ In fact, the epic poems by Homer can undoubtedly be considered among the main texts from which our thought has originated and indeed--our age being as cruel and fond of war as the primitive times of mankind--they are still studied and

¹ (My translation) Ernesto Galli della Loggia, *Introduction* to the Italian translation of Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. VII.

² Ibid.

³ See Bruno Snell, *Die Entdeckung des Geistes: Studien zur Entstehung des europäischen Denkens bei den Griechen* (Hamburg: Classen, 1955).

read. The tragic events dominating our daily life seem to confirm that human nature, in spite of centuries and centuries of evolution, has not changed that much in its perception of violence and war. This does not mean of course that we might identify *tout court* such different stages of our history as the dawn of Western culture and our modern society; yet, there must be still some common features between the old and contemporary human attitudes towards war. It cannot be denied indeed that nowadays, as in our most remote past, war--although in different degrees--has got a male connotation: the heroic figures of the Homeric characters maintain their charismatic strength even today. If we read through the dramatic pages of the events of this last century of our history, we might realise that the modern myths of virile values and male bravery are simply the same old ones in disguise. In such a context, war continues to be regarded mainly from a masculine point of view, and writers and protagonists of literary and real battles are traditionally male. Nevertheless, even in Homeric society there are female characters whose position in the war--though subordinate to that of Achilles, Agamemnon, Hector and Odysseus etc.--is not to be neglected: in fact, the poetic power of the old *aedos* has imbued with greatness also the women of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, whose moral highness makes them as heroic as their men. It seems to me that in these female characters we might identify the archetypes of women as handed down in our Western tradition, which therefore cannot overlook the women's side of war. According to Homer, it is possible to outline different types of "women in war": the Andromache type, i.e. the loving wife who after observing the battlefield in trepidation for her man, receives the terrible news of his brave death; Hecuba, the archetype of the mother of heroes; Penelope, the symbol of the devoted wife who never ceases to wait for the *nostos* of her warrior. All of them share the common, tragic destiny of being innocent victims of the war and, at the same time, participating spectators of violence and battles. Violence, blood-lust and desire for immortality--the features characterising the male attitude towards the conflicts--represent a striking contrast with the love of peace, the maternal tenderness and the sweetness which appear to be the main traits of the Homeric women. Even if they accept the moral code based on honour and *kalokagathia*, expressing in fact all their pride in being mothers or wives of courageous heroes, they cannot hide a more "feminine"--and perhaps genetically inherited--longing for peace and domestic happiness.

2. Sappho and Women's Perspective on Values: War and Love

At this point, we might ask ourselves what has happened to those female archetypes during the centuries: if the male dimension of conflicts and battles seems to have saved--to some extent--the traditional features of the ancient heroes in the contemporary looks of modern soldiers, it might be implied that there must be still something of the epic women in the female characters of real and fictitious war-stories of our age. Yet, before seeking the above archetypes in the complexity of today's consciousness, it is worth taking into account a fourth possibility of woman-and-war, which significantly is again part of the old Greek heritage: it is the woman writer expressing a radically new code of values:

Some say a cavalry corps,
some infantry, some, again
will maintain that the swift oars

of our fleet are the finest
sight on dark earth; but I say
that whatever one loves, is.

This is easily proved: did
not Helen--she who had scanned
the flower of the world's manhood--

choose as first among men one
who laid Troy's honor in ruin?
warped to his will, forgetting

love due her own blood, her own

child, she wandered far with him...⁴

These verses belong to the famous poem in which the Greek poetess Sappho expressed a feminine attitude towards war, as it spread after the collapse of the heroic age. The main idea lying underneath the lines remains dramatically alive, replacing in part the more strict categories of epic poetry: in fact, Sappho gives voice to the women's vision. It goes without saying that the sudden appearance of a female writer turns upside down the male-orientated rules and thought of ancient civilisation. Furthermore, women can manifest their feelings through a woman's art: so it happens that the dichotomy between the martial values of fighting and strength and the pacific ideals of love, maternal care and human tenderness--emblematic of the eternal archetypes of man and woman and implicit even in the Homeric world--finds its more suitable expression. Significantly, the poetess has managed to create a lyric the validity of which cannot be denied even today. Indeed, in spite of the chronological distance, it seems that our frame of mind is still informed by similar concepts of "masculine" and "feminine" elaborated and put into verses by Sappho, as is shown clearly by the above text.

In the original version, the poetess creates a strong tension in the dynamic movement of the lyric by opposing the masculine pronouns referring to traditionally military objects and, therefore, values and the subject 'I' : the readers--or, better, listeners--were perfectly aware of the writer's identity, so that they could give to 'I' the proper feminine connotation.

Needless to say, Sappho's innovative thought appears to belong to those eternal truths which constitute the everlasting fundamentals of Western culture. The poem effectively indicates the opposition between a woman-poet and the more conventionally appreciated men-poets, whose main task--as has already been seen--is to celebrate the warriors' *kalogakathia*. In contrast with the epic poetic tradition--masculine *par excellence*--Sappho

⁴ Quoted in H.M Cooper, A. Munich, S.M. Squieter (eds), *Arms and Women: Gender and Literary Representation* (London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), p. XIV.

emphasises the value of *eros*, far more relevant to her feminine eyes than the biggest fleet on earth. Moreover, her opinion acquires an even more striking feature through her new interpretation of Helen's myth: Helen is not to blame for having caused the outbreak of the war between Greeks and Trojans, Sappho maintains. It was not her responsibility, but the gods' will to provoke such terrible consequences; it was because of the gods' order that Helen abandoned her husband and her family to follow her lover, flouting men's moral code. For this woman, emblematic of the abstract concept of feminine beauty, her husband Menelaus and his brother Agamemnon started a long war causing death and destruction only to save their honour. Disregarding the common opinion about this matter, Sappho with a radically new logic seems to imply that the real *casus belli* was not Helen at all, but rather men's celebration of virile values and, particularly, their immense love for war. What is worth underlining is that Sappho's idea outlines the more restricted boundaries of a female universe which, dominated by love and affection, does not share men's interest in fighting and *aretè*. Above all, Helen's world is centred on her passion for the young and handsome Paris, and she is far from having any idea that her irrational decision might have such nefarious consequences. Yet, apart from her function in the opposition *love versus war*, Helen cannot be considered emblematic of female attitudes towards war, in the sense that--despite being not fully aware of it--she has been the cause of the war, while normally--as history demonstrates--women have simply been involved, although with different degrees of participation, in wars provoked by men.⁵

Generally speaking, women, and even the more timid Homeric female characters, seem to consider war only a menace to their domestic happiness and everyday routine, as Sappho, in another of her lyrics, has shown: mentioning a war which involves Mytilene, her native town, she expresses her concern only about the consequences it produces, no matter how trivial they might be (the poetess complains because she cannot give her daughter a

⁵ In the light of the above consideration, it is not my intention here to take into account the archetype of Helen as allegory of the nation state, since this topic would require a more wide-ranging examination which cannot be carried out here. In fact in the works analysed in the following pages, I was not able to find a proper collocation for Helen's archetype--with which none of the women characters and writers taken into account seems to identify.

typically Oriental hair-style for the trade has been interrupted because of the war).⁶ Without being fully aware of it, the Greek poetess anticipates a concept that has become a current topic of contemporary critical and historical theories, either feminist or not: the idea of *sexual difference*, as developed and manifested in the two lyrics above.⁷

Sappho's attitude towards conflicts and battles might be regarded as emblematic of a more generally feminine response to what, as war, has commonly been considered "men's business". Neither the names of different weapons, their number and their efficacy, nor military strategies appear, in Sappho's lines, to attract women's attention, which--on the other hand--is paid only to the obscure reasons of such terrible events. We might reasonably suppose, indeed, that even the brave wives and mothers of the *epos*--although closer than Sappho to the logic and dynamics of wars and struggles--would join the endless gallery of war-dissenters, if only they had a *spokeswoman* instead of a *spokesman*. In fact, it cannot be doubted that what comes to women's minds in most cases is simply the question: *why?*, accompanied by the restless enquiry about death and life.

Poetry is said to express sentiments, emotions and values which remain valid throughout the centuries, constituting the common heritage of mankind. This accounts for the fact that both the epic tradition and the lyric productions flourishing in the classic world have rightly been regarded as the first and yet everlasting manifestations of European *Geist*. Indeed, the female characters of the Greek literary world display features and attitudes that cannot be confined to the age and the civilisation which originated them. Above all, it is through the artistic gift of the greatest woman poet of antiquity that the "feminine" world-view first finds its powerful expression. The aforementioned lines by Sappho rightly claim their modernity, and still give voice to women's attitude towards history and--in the present

⁶ See Giuseppe Rosati (ed.), *Scrittori di Grecia I* (Bari: Laterza, 1986), p. 303.

⁷ See Mary Eagleton, *Feminist Literary Theory* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp.201-07.

case--towards war. For the first time, the poetess asserts the existence of a female perception of war, in which women show they have their own ideas and views about this typical "men's business". Then the contrast between the male and female approach to military events--a contrast which had been not entirely visible in the "virility" of the *epos*--finds in Sappho its clear statement; from this moment onwards, the dichotomy between men-soldiers and affectionate women preserving the domestic front becomes a recurrent *topos* of Western literature. In fact, our literary tradition--from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* through the *chansons de geste*, Renaissance long poems and eighteenth-and nineteenth-century romances and novels--has kept alive the abovementioned dichotomy, which still appears in films and fiction dealing with the two World Wars. At this point, we might infer that there is a continuous line linking together these different expressions which have played such a crucial part in the development of modern consciousness.

3. Women and War: Ancient Archetypes still alive

Nevertheless, together with these traditional features, some new aspects characterise the relationship between women and war in contemporary society: the tragedies that have dominated--and still do--the history and daily life of twentieth-century civilisation have left their mark. Women's approach to the interrelated questions of war and peace has become multifarious nowadays and therefore defies strict categories: in fact, literary texts as well as reports from battlefronts suggest that in some cases the threat of death, the excitement of danger and the myth of heroism are shared even by women. More often, it simply happens that women refuse the stereotyped role of "waiting-angel-in-the-house" and take a much more active part in military actions, as has been demonstrated by the events of the Resistance in Italy and in France during the Second World War. It appears that the new military strategies and the impact of the "total conflict" as tragically experienced by the whole of mankind during the First and especially the Second World War have inevitably provoked a dramatic change even in the "tender" and "sweet" nature of women. What has happened, then, to the mothers, the daughters, the wives and lovers ready to sacrifice their lives to save their beloved ones, according to the images of the suffering women described in the most

texts of world literature? My question, at this point, is: can we still discover in the “ordinary” women of our modern societies the traits of the archetypal figures handed down throughout the centuries? It seems to me, then, that it may be interesting to look for the Andromaches, Hecubas, Penelopes,--populating our imagination in the more recent experiences of “women in war” as well as for the modern embodiment of Sappho’s denial of martial values. The female population we could take into account might be constituted by the long theory of both anonymous and well-known feminine characters acting on the vast stage of twentieth-century wars. Yet, our position of contemporary spectators does not enable us to have a full perspective of these “tragic performances” , since their chronological and geographical frontiers--comprising at least eighty years and virtually covering the entire surface of the earth--go well beyond the limited human capacity of understanding. Therefore, our field of enquiry must *perforce* be restricted, focusing on some specific war experiences which might be regarded as particularly significant. A possible solution might be to take into account the testimonies concerning--say--two nations involved in the last World War, which is near enough to be vividly present in our memories and, at the same time, distant enough to be seen objectively. Great Britain and Italy might constitute a suitable geographical and cultural context for this kind of enquiry, being emblematic of two different European ways of living through war. Both nations have, indeed, played an important part in the course of events; yet the former lived the conflict in a more “traditional” way, by sending her soldiers to the front, supporting them and living day by day under the constant threat of air raids (as in the bombing of London, Coventry and many other cities); the latter--because of the complex political situation preceding and following the outbreak of the War--became a chaotic battlefield, comprising, in the territory of just one country, several fronts--including the civilians’ one--opposing each other and leading to a catastrophic civil war. It goes without saying that this choice--like any other--is bound to be arbitrary to some extent: yet, in spite of this, it seems to offer an adequate ground for this research.

4. Lines of Enquiry: Clarke and Schneider

At this point, it is possible to indicate more precisely the line of enquiry and the main issue which has aroused my curiosity in the reading of texts dealing with women and war: is there any critical perception, any coherent female thought about war and conflicts? This question comes directly from our living side by side with the tragic events of contemporary history which, as in the Second World War, has seen a total involvement of women both in visible and hidden ways. The striking up-to-dateness of this topic is emphasised by the fact that there are already some studies related to this theme, although to my knowledge none of them has dealt with two (or more) cultural contexts. Nevertheless, some useful tips or--at least--interpretative keys might be found in two works which explicitly treat the theme of the relationship between women and war: the first is entitled *Know This Is Your War: British Women Writers and the Two World Wars*, a Ph.D. thesis submitted by Jennifer Clarke at the State University of New York in 1989; the second is *Altered Stories, Altered States: British Women Writing the Second World War* by K.L.Schneider, in application for the degree of Ph.D. at Indiana University in 1991.

Clarke analyses the war-stories by three British women writers--Rebecca West, Edith Sitwell, Vera Brittain--who lived through and survived the two World Wars, challenging the accepted tradition according to which this genre belongs to "male" literature. It is undoubtedly true that women cannot tell the same stories as men, especially because in general they did not fight or die on the battlefield. In particular, as Clarke points out, Rebecca West and Vera Brittain advised women to look beyond their garden gates in order to realise the existence of the chaos (war) outside the shelter of their houses. As a direct consequence of this new awareness, women could not prevent themselves from playing an active role against war and violence, and from this the source for "women's war literature" originates. The most diffuse sentiment visible in the works of women writers about the Second War--in Clarke's opinion--is the sense of guilt felt by women who considered war and death the sacrifice paid by their men for the sake of their weak, defenceless wives, daughters and mothers.

K.L. Schneider takes into account several British authors, such as Stevie Smith, Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Bowen and Doris Lessing, who have all written about the Second War. The link between them might be found in their turning upside-down some features of the male genre of war narrative, especially in giving emphasis to the psychic and domestic battlegrounds in contrast with the traditional, all male fronts. From a feminist point of view, Schneider identifies the common topic of women's war writing in their many-sided attitude towards the conflict: revulsion from Nazi fascism, identification with Britain's struggle for survival, ironic contemplation of the incipient fascism in the established patriarchal culture.

The two theses I have referred to might provide some interpretative keys useful to my study--especially as far as themes are concerned. My study joins a large number of works about women and war. The Italian field will also be taken into account, despite the relative lack of studies dealing with Italian women writers and the Second World War.

5. Critics and Feminism

At this stage, with regard to the possible perspectives through which to analyse the topic of war and women, it might be useful to offer a brief premise about feminist theory and feminist criticism, in order to explain the reasons for my own critical approach.

According to Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, writing has been essentially male, conferring on the male writer authority and the right to create, to control and possess.⁸ The potential of women's writing has been inhibited by a complex combination of material (lack of privacy, inequality of education, burdens of childbearing, domestic duty) and ideological factors. Therefore, the figure of the woman-writer—apart from a few occurrences in classical antiquity, such as the poetesses Sappho and the Alexandrine Anite—is a 'new entry' in the world of literary production. As Ellen Moers has emphasised,⁹ women's literature as an

⁸ See 'The Madwoman in the Attic', in Eagleton, pp. 63-9.

⁹ See 'Literary Women', in Eagleton, pp. 8-11.

international movement began in the late eighteenth century and then developed fruitfully in the following period. Elaine Showalter--who, however, does not agree with the notion of a movement of women's literature--has pointed out that this development can be divided into three main stages, proposing a period-division that, although concerning the tradition of the British novel, might be extended to female writing in general: the first 'feminine' period from the 1840s to 1880s; the second 'feminist' stage up to 1920 with the winning of the vote; and the third, the 'female' one, from 1920 to present: the phase of self-discovery and the search for identity.¹⁰

The notion of 'women's literature' and the critical approach to women's literary works have aroused a series of apparently endless arguments. To start with, the concept of a 'female imagination' has itself been considered debatable: for instance, Showalter maintains that the notion of women's imagination is an odd one, since it runs dangerously close to reiterating the familiar stereotypes and suggests the permanence of a deep, basic difference of perceiving the world.¹¹ This problem is strictly linked with the question about what has to be analysed as expression of women's literature: all literary works by women--which, obviously, do not identify *tout court* with feminist writing--or works centred on women, or works by feminist writers.

Therefore, even literary criticism has been based on the traditional stereotypes of male and female attributes: traditionally art is male and anything women write is simply a 'feminine' contribution to the establishment of 'male' literature.¹² As a result, is it necessary for women critics to create new categories and methods of critical examination, which--being different from those thought up by men for 'male' works--might be considered more properly applicable to women's writing? Or is this a futile question aroused by the same well-rooted discrimination between male and female? Indeed, we might agree with Michèle Barrett, when she says that feminist literary criticism tends to consider the male-dominated tradition as the

¹⁰ See 'A literature of Their Own', in Eagleton, pp.11-15.

¹¹ Ibid., p.12.

¹² See Eagleton, p.40-1.

reference point for women's writing; therefore, feminist critics are often embroiled in a fruitless competition with male tradition, considering any female work a 'classic' or a great work which failed to become famous only because it has not been valued or has not been allowed to.¹³

The above picture of questions and problems about a critical approach to women's writing appears still more complex, if we think that the field of literary criticism in general--or 'male' criticism--is characterised by radically different trends and multifarious issues, categories and questions, stemming from different philosophical and cultural movements (Romanticism, Marxism, Psychoanalysis, Existentialism, Linguistics, Semiotics, etc.). Then, feminist critics themselves refer to some of the above 'schools', especially to Marxism, Psychoanalysis and Linguistics, and, in general terms, might be divided into two main groups, French and Anglo-American, both with their own exponents, often in disagreement with each other.¹⁴

Given the difficulty of reaching at a consensus among feminists themselves about what constitutes feminist art, I will not discuss here this controversial question.¹⁵ I agree that women's art does not necessarily mean feminist art, though focusing upon women's stories and lives. Moreover, the works I am to examine in the following pages were not written with a precisely feminist outlook, nor were they intended as to convey an explicit political protest (that is, there is no such specific authorial intention). Indeed, I have turned to works and testimonies written by women who were not or at least did not show themselves in these works to be part of a political movement, since they can also offer an interesting critical approach that takes into account a feminist perspective. Yet I would like to emphasise that my perspective will not be greatly influenced by the current feminist debates on all kinds of women's activities. A line of enquiry linked with the most relevant motives animating feminist

¹³ Ibid., p.4

¹⁴ See Eagleton; see also Mary Eagleton (ed.), *Feminist Literary Criticism* (London and New York: Longman, 1991).

¹⁵ See Eagleton, *Feminist Literary Theory*, p.149.

criticism requires a wider field and a specific competence on the topic of women's emancipation--both of which premises are alien to my purpose and my knowledge.

In addition, it seems to me that under the present circumstances a study dealing with *war and women* might be useful in order to understand the dynamics of contemporary history, still dominated by the tragedies of conflicts. To me, war and violence are strictly linked with the problem of *otherness*, which, obviously combined with more factors (politics and economics above all), is, indeed, the key to explain most old and contemporary conflicts. Unfortunately the contrast with the 'diverse' is still solved, in some cases, by employing force and violence--as recent, tragic events of contemporary history show every day. This means that there must be something that escapes the control of the rational in the individual as well as in social groups or in institutions and governments. Jean Bethke Elshtain reminds us that wars are fought because they are not prevented.¹⁶ Yet this statement leaves us somehow perplexed. Why is it so difficult to prevent wars? Not even the notion of '*homo homini lupus*' might explain an outburst of violence such as to employ nuclear or sophisticated chemical weapons. Firstly, it is people's political education that has to be put on trial. Without correct 'political education' it is impossible even to think of a pacific world in contemporary society. There are many different calls for correct education for peace, which has to begin by recognising and solving the most ancient form of struggle: that between sexes. In fact, what is generally lacking in our modern mentality is the acknowledgement of the male difficulty to accept the diverse gender, female. We cannot identify the murdering violence producing war with the one which has produced--and still does--women's submission; yet, it cannot be doubted that a society cannot even speak of *non-violence* if justifies and tolerates any kind of violence against women. The right of sexual difference, as well as of other differences, does not express feminist egocentrism, but rather celebrates human beings' acceptance of their being 'dual', or simply different. Therefore, women have claimed to be recognised as 'equals' and to be respected with their own differences; this form of respect can generate respect of

¹⁶ Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Women and War* (Brighton: Harvester, 1987).

any other human otherness: to me, mankind's incapability of recognising and accepting *otherness* is the main cause of present wars. In brief, the acknowledgement of female difference is the first, effective step to build 'horizontal' relationships and to create new human societies where differences are not denied or seen as synonyms of inferiority, but accepted by everyone.

At this point, to our eyes women all over the world seem to constitute a significant and available determinant of change. Effective actions towards a *new order* can be taken only by regarding women as independent individuals and speaking-subjects--and this does not mean that they have to become subjects *identical* to man: in fact, although woman is equal, she is different.

Therefore, only by building a culture of difference which does not destroy any gender identity and does not confound the sexes but reassert their difference is it possible to construct a common space which really belongs to both men and women. Consequently, the question 'what does a woman want?'--upon which feminism has begun to debate--implies that any woman far from being simply the addressee of the word--either literary or political--finds herself in the position of speaking-subject asserting her authentic female essence.

6.Literary genres

As I have already said, in order to reach a wider view on the topic, I shall not confine myself to the boundaries of literary genres, but consider some samples of poetry, fiction and diaries produced in both Italy and Britain. Since the major writers have already been explored, my research will employ the suggestions offered by the two abovementioned surveys by Clarke and Schneider in relation to the less studied experiences of ordinary women as contained in diaries, reports and narratives which are not generally considered among the most notable works on this subject. The unifying issue will be the women's thought about war, seen through their open statements as well as through their less conspicuous actions and words: in brief, I shall attempt to reach the depths of their more intimate reflections by reading the lines and deciphering also what is hidden between and behind them.

The texts I shall examine do not belong to the more celebrated--and consequently more studied--literary productions about the Second War: in fact, in my opinion, there is not much I could add to the already long and detailed bibliography of critical research on works like Vera Brittain's, Stevie Smith's, etc. on the British side and Natalia Ginzburg's, Elsa Morante's and others on the Italian one. Therefore, I will restrict my topic to less known works, which will be: some poems by British writers collected in an anthology edited by Catherine Reilly; a novel by the Italian Renata Viganò, *L'Agnese va a morire*; the reports of some British female observers commissioned by Mass-Observation and similar testimonies of Italian women as reported by the writer and journalist Miriam Mafai in *Pane nero*.

The last point worth stressing concerns the comparative perspective I will employ. Without following any prescriptive method of "comparativism"--since the debate about the possible methods is still going on--my purpose is to outline women's thought about war experience, finding out similarities and discrepancies between British and Italian cultures, rather than carry out a precise critical and aesthetically orientated analysis according to fixed criteria. This is the reason why I am taking into account samples of different literary genres, since I have chosen my texts according to the plurality of themes they treat rather than their purely artistic value. Therefore--themes, more than forms, being the issues of this work--it is also worth emphasising that I will overlook the differences among the various literary genres, in spite of the relevance they might have as testimonies of women's writing. In fact, as some critics have pointed out,¹⁷ the genre of the novel has been the first to be open to women--both readers and writers--being by definition more popular and less 'educated' than other kinds of literature; this appears clearly, if we consider the rise of the novel in Great Britain and the number and quality of British female novelists from last century onwards. On the other hand, the opposite applies to poetry, which has been since its very beginning a high-brow genre, restricted to a limited group of readers/listeners and writers. Nevertheless, it seems to me that this sort of consideration, developing the theme about *gender and genre* widely treated and differently judged by several feminist critics--see, for instance, K.K. Ruthven, Juliet Mitchell,

¹⁷ See Eagleton, *Feminist Literary Theory*, p.88.

Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and so on--¹⁸would deserve a fuller analysis than my present survey is able to carry out.

By examining works belonging to different genres, a further consideration emerges: looking at the various forms, it is clear that women have chosen different literary genres the better to manifest their views and feelings upon such a tragic event as war. Reversing the wide-spread idea that due to their feminine nature women are excluded from direct acquaintance with war and, above all, challenging the traditional 'thinking' according to which women's more suitable genre is fiction, as less alien than other male-dominated literary genres like poetry, not only have women revealed that they certainly know about war, but also that they can write about it in whatever form they choose. I am not concerned with any critical absolutism, nor will I discuss here the feminist concept of *écriture féminine*, since it requires a longer treatment.¹⁹ It is sufficient here to say that I tried to move beyond this alternative since it implies a certain dogmatism which prevents women from inscribing themselves within a literary discourse in order to change or revitalise it. I have therefore tried to escape being trapped within the impasse of the debate, looking rather for a way to build a possible common space.

Finally, I would like to define the use of the terms 'feminine' and 'female', as occurring in the following pages. The interchangeable use I might have made in this thesis of the terms 'feminine' and 'female'--which could be rather confusing to an English reader--is due to the fact that the Italian adjective *femminile* can mean both 'female' and 'feminine'. The same applies to the related 'male' and 'masculine'. In this work, however, I will use the terms according to the conventional use in feminist writing, that is "to use 'feminine' to refer to the cultural construction of women and 'female' to refer to biology".²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid., pp.88-148.

¹⁹ For a discussion of this concept see Eagleton, *Feminist Literary Theory*, p.200-35.

²⁰ This quotation is taken from Eagleton, *Feminist Literary Theory*, p.200.

CHAPTER I

PENELOPE AND OTHERS: BRITISH WOMEN'S POETRY

ABOUT

THE SECOND WORLD WAR

1. War poets and the *horror vacui*

There's no new spirit abroad,
As I looked, I saw;
And I say that it is to the poet's merit
To be silent about the war.

This poem by Stevie Smith, *The Poets are Silent*,¹ deals with the typically nineteenth-century theme of the loss of expressive power experienced by poetry. The employment of the terms *poets* and *silent* immediately confronts the reader with a paradox: indeed, these two words--creating a dichotomy of concepts--betray a poetic tension that underpins any further analysis of the poem. Before attempting an explanation of the *why*, *what*, *when* and *where* aroused by these lines, it might be useful to carry out a textual analysis of the above lyric.

In lines 2-3, the author moves the main steps of the creative process by employing three relevant verbs: *to look*, *to see* and *to say*. *As I looked* (l.2) describes the poet's attitude

¹ *Collected Poems* (London: Allen Lane, 1975), p.208.

towards reality, being the verb emblematic of the human ability to use eyes and to embrace with one gaze everything the horizon can contain. At this stage, the poet offers him/herself as a representative of mankind and, in this way, the poem seems to be endowed with a universal quality that certainly is the first requirement of poetry (according to the archetype function of *poiesis*). The second step corresponds to *I saw* (l.3), which signifies a more “intellectual” approach to reality: indeed, despite the high frequency of *to see* in everyday speech, the poet has given new force to its trivial meaning by suggesting the enquiring movement of the human mind. Therefore, the poet is the one--just taken from the collectivity--who can use the basic sense of seeing in a more refined and rational way in order to analyse reality. The third verb referring to the final moment of the poetic route is *to say*, which constitutes the acme of poetic creation, the passage from sensations and thoughts to words. The contrast between the past tense of *looked* and *saw* with the present of *say* expresses the chronological distance between the moment of experience and that of reflection which prelude the poetry. As the last line will reveal, the reality seen and lived by the I-poet refers to the war. The occurrence of the article *the* before *war* implies reference to specific circumstances which are to be identified with the last world conflict, as if that has been the only war, the war *par excellence*. The geographical borders of the war appear to be so wide that they would not be even referred to but for the adverb *abroad* (l.1), which seems to enlarge the battlefield and to add a universal dimension to the conflict.

In such a wide context, the author mentions the creative power without which no poetry can be written and which cannot be confined to restricted areas of our civilization: the *new spirit* of the first line, indeed, seems to retain the main features characterising the well-established view of poetry as the product of divine *inspiration*. In this way, the poet--although apparently denying being invested by the spirit of creation--is simply and effectively implying a link with the tradition of the lyric genre. As a result, the message conveyed here acquires the status of universal truth and, again, it seems that every single word of the poem possesses an undeniable validity. Therefore, the poetic subject acts as a representative of the whole of mankind that is made speechless by the horrors of war. In this regard, it is worth underlining the relevant position held by the word *war*, which is indeed placed on the level of a universally lived experience. The thematic importance of the concept of war corresponds to

the significant metrical position of the term at the very end of the poem. Followed by the full stop, *war* represents the final part of the poetic route evoked by the writer, whose skills as an artist are impotent to defy the negative power wielded by violence. The silence which is referred to is displayed--both metaphorically and visibly--by the absence of any other message afterwards: it is as if war were not only the close of the poem but also of the poet's expressive abilities. In a way, we might say that this device creates a sense of being disconcerted which can be vividly represented by either shouts and cries (wide-opened mouths) or by the opposite condition of silence (shut mouths). Silence is indeed the only response aroused by war, a dumb force which wipes out the entire bulk of values and certainties accumulated by centuries of civilisation. What is left is simply the assertion of a vacuum, the statement of inadequacy the admission of defeat. The misery and the bareness of the ruins of the war find perfect correspondance in the conciseness of the short lines of this lyric, characterised by an unadorned style: verbs and nouns predominate over adjectives to signify the rejection of the *ornatus*, replaced by sentences and terms belonging to the sphere of everyday speech. All metaphors and ornaments have collapsed under the bewildered eyes of poets and the common people. *To be silent about the war* has become the inescapable condition shared by everyone and perfectly expressed in the last, epigrammatic line. At this point, in more general terms, it appears that the endless series of tragedies and catastrophes characterising this century has deprived poetry--traditionally considered one of the most powerful outlets for human emotions--of its *mythopoeic* status: a condition of inadequacy apparent in several poetic productions of European authors and occurring as a *leit-motiv* after the Great War. The awareness of the chaos, of the fear and menace lurking in our daily existence, has led poets--as well as intellectuals and "ordinary" people--to reject their role of word and myth makers, which has been their acknowledged function throughout the development of our culture. As a result, in the works of several poets writing during and after the First and the Second War, silence occurs either in a conspicuous or in a implicit form to emphasise the gap separating the unutterable experience of war horrors and the fixed heritage of words handed down in poetic language.

In the light of the above analysis, this lyric might be regarded as a sort of *manifesto* of a shared attitude towards war. Indeed, these four lines--containing *in nuce* the complex and

sometimes contradictory sentiments and ideas of intellectuals writing about war--do not appear to possess any original feature which might enable the reader to locate them in a specific context, let alone to identify the author and its environment. Yet, when we find out that the poem has been written by a British *poetess*, Stevie Smith, and published in 1942, it acquires a radically new relevance which is connected to two aspects normally constituting opposite poles: war and women, particularly women writers.

As already said about Sappho above (p.3), poetry and intellectual activities in general have never been considered female fields. Without considering the latest events of the history of women in our century and all debates about sex roles in modern society, women's place in the making of Western civilisation has for the most part been a subordinate one. Therefore, it appears remarkable that not only can we find a wide host of female writers but also that they are not scared by the male theme of war. The coexistence of these two aspects is clearly seen in a personality such as Stevie Smith's. Nevertheless, a closer look at the poetic production in Britain from the forties onwards reveals that Stevie Smith is just one member of a large community of women writers who did not refrain from taking a stance in relation to the war, and putting it into poetic form. According to Catherine Reilly, there is a long bibliography of "female" poetic works of and about the Second World War. Yet she says that "anthology editors must include whom they will in their collections but it is very surprising to find so little verse by women".² This consideration might be regarded as a good reason in itself to explore the *no women's land* represented by women's poetry about the last conflict.

Before going to the core of the argument, it might be useful to outline the main features of war literature produced during this century. The first works reflecting and coming from individual and collective war experiences refer to the Great War. There is no need to stress the turning point represented by the First World War in the making of a martial iconography and a common memory for modern civilisation. The Great War was indeed a revolutionary new thing, a different approach to conflicts and violence from the traditional

² Catherine Reilly, *Introduction to Chaos of the Night* (London: Virago Press, 1984), p. xxi.

history of human battles. For the first time the entire Western world was involved in a conflict which saw so many reasons and contrasting interests, since it was the result of decades of fermentation and turmoil, turning upside down the establishments of the major European countries.

The main consequences of those multifarious reasons for such a devastating conflict were to influence the human view of war, mirroring the crumbling of the old ideas and, at the same time, the absence of replacing values. The analysis of the most remarkable features of this new approach towards war has found its best representatives in the well-known surveys by Paul Fussell³ and Eric J. Leed⁴, whose main idea is that the Great War--a hitherto unknown experience--was read by its protagonists through the categories of traditional war literature and archetypal war values. It seems to me that a reasonable explanation for this might be discovered in the ancestral human need to apply old interpretative keys to incomprehensible new reality: according to Fussell, this might account for the literary aspects of the Great War, which has been defined as a literary--rather than real--war. In the prose writings and, above all, in the poems of young soldiers fighting during the years between 1914 and 1918, it is easy to detect a literary vein which builds a striking contrast with the terrific reality of horror and decay happening both on the battlefield and on the home front. Britain seems to have produced a large group of these writers who brought to war the moral, aesthetic and artistic codes they had known from education and tradition. Nevertheless, the terrible life of trenches, the horror of massacres and the trauma of war gained wide access within the literature of the Great War. Moreover, war psychological consequences upon combatants--as Fussell and Leed have pointed out--revealed an authentic crisis of virility. The theme of impotence--both real and figurative--obsesses this literature which is populated by modern yet paralyzed or mutilated 'anti-heroes'. Emblematic of this kind of war literature

³ *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975).

⁴ *Terra di nessuno. Esperienza bellica e identità personale nella prima guerra mondiale* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1985); transl. of *No Man's Land. Combat and Identity in World War I* (Cambridge: Camb. U P, 1979).

might be the poet Wilfred Owen⁵, who gave dramatic embodiment to the most hideous sides of war such as the terrible mutilation of strong men transformed into cripples.

Fussell's brilliant analysis--although dealing with the specific subject of British literary productions--might find some applications in the broader field of Western literature. Indeed, according to a rooted belief of criticism--dating back to the second half of last century and particularly wide-spread in our century--every literary production is a mirror of the forces and the dynamics governing its environment.⁶ This concept, which is perhaps particularly applicable to the literary genre of poetry (widely thought to spring from the authentic Spirit of the Age) enables the contemporary reader to discover similarities among different fields of enquiry: the Great War was one and, in spite of the different motivations, approaches, historical and political conditions, the countries involved must have lived much of it in a somewhat similar way. This means that even in the productions of Italian poets, many aspects identified by Fussell might be regarded as fundamental features. A very clear example of this is represented by Giuseppe Ungaretti's poems from *L'Allegria*, where he translates into poetic terms the soldier's awareness of human misery, his constant struggle with death, the petty absurdity of war tragedy.⁷

In this wide context of soldier poets what has happened to the Sapphic archetype? According to some English bibliographies, there was a large production of lyrics by women.⁸ As in the case of men's poems, several critical studies have been devoted to this field. Since the Great War represented the first modern manifestation of war, wartime productions imposed themselves and their striking novelty for the first time during and after this conflict.

⁵ *War Poems and Others* (Ital. transl. *Poesie di guerra*), Sergio Rufini (ed.), (Torino: Einaudi).

⁶ For example, the Italian Francesco De Sanctis has promoted this critical view of the mutual dependence between literature and social-historical circumstances, in his *Storia della letteratura italiana*, Benedetto Croce (ed.), (Bari: Laterza, 1949).

⁷ See Nicola Valerio and Ferdinando Pappalardo (eds.), *La letteratura nella storia d'Italia. Il Novecento*, vol.III, Tomo II (Napoli: Il Tripode).

⁸ See for instance Janet Todd (ed.), *Dictionary of British Women Writers* (London: 1989).

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that for the contemporary reader the Second World War and its horrific development towards a total conflict provides more fruitful ground for enquiry: it had few of the 'literary' features of the former conflict, and the outburst of violence which it generated led in an escalation of horrors to the terrifying realities of concentration camps and the atomic bomb, which went beyond the bounds of normal human imagination. Therefore, it is to be argued that the literary implications of these differences could be enlightening in order to understand more deeply the contemporary development of some literary themes. One of them--a topic that possesses also a wider sociological and anthropological connotation--regards the feminine archetypes of the woman poet. Catherine Reilly maintains that

parallels between the poetry of the two wars should be drawn with reservations. Literature, perhaps especially poetry, mirrors the society from which it springs. Although barely twenty-one years separated the wars, the social and economic changes in that time were enormous.⁹

In fact, although some exterior features of war literature, as well as some topics closely linked to war, remained the same, it cannot be denied that literary productions of the Second World War represent a further step in the process of independence from nineteenth-century tradition. It is worth underlining that during the twenties and thirties the changes in culture and society produced a deep transformation in the artistic field, which would have been different from the first years of the century even without the Second World War. If we consider the spreading of some literary movements characterising Western literature between the two wars, we can infer that some themes such as the awareness of the poet's inability to give poetic structure to his chaotic perception of reality, were already present. The modernist need for renovation in forms and content was to find an outlet in a completely innovative language expressing a new correspondence between exterior codes and inner values. Baudelaire's forest of symbols had become more and more obscure and wild, mirroring the increasing denaturation of the poetic language. To reflect chaos and misery by means of a

⁹ *Chaos of the Night*, p. xxii.

language which was deprived of meaning there were two different solutions: one consisted of an enrichment of language, an overflowing of words to convey just one meaning; the other was to admit the loss of expressive power and accept the defeat of words: i.e. the celebration of silence. The Second World War influenced the poetic search for solutions and made the second choice far more popular than the first. That is the reason why Stevie Smith's poem can be regarded as a typical product of the second conflict.

On the other hand, it is worth underlining that the theme of silence appears also in other British poetesses, though in completely different ways; we might even say that this topic is not at all a secondary one in poems written by women. Yet, while Stevie Smith's silence might be regarded as emblematic of the poet's inability to express his/her chaotic perception of reality in lyric form, the "no sound" referred to in poetic works by other women writers, does not reveal the same degree of awareness. More simply, silence replaces the cry of desperation for the tremendous disasters caused by the conflict; in this sense, women writers manage to give voice to all humanity, sometimes to "only female" humanity, sometimes to mankind without discrimination. The first case might be exemplified by Freda Laughton's *The Evacuees*¹⁰ and by Vera Bax's lyric *To Richard my Son*,¹¹ whereas the conclusive lines of Marion Coleman's *Monte Cassino*¹² might be seen as emblematic of the second case. Indeed, in *The Evacuees* we find expressed from the very beginning the image of a silent atmosphere:

There is no sound of guns here, nor echo of guns. (l.1)

to emphasise the striking contrast between the tremendous noise of a war scenery and the quietness characterising a place where the "spasm of bombs has dissolved" and the only "music" is constituted by the noise of the tractors or other typical operations of field-workers.

¹⁰ Reilly, p.73.

¹¹ Ibid., p.13.

¹² Ibid., p.31.

Vera Bax too, manifests her impossibility of giving voice to her sorrow by explicitly saying:

I hide my grief throughout the weary days

as the only way to continue life.

The final lines of *Monte Cassino*--by employing the effective image of death encountering life--significantly convey the sense of absolute desperation and mortal atmosphere invading any human being who 'contemplates' a war panorama and whose speechless reaction mirrors the silence covering 'for ever' that lifeless scenery.

Where light shone, order and praise sang softly,

...

now is only bomb-struck desolation.

Death has leapt upon life,

and the shriek of the encounter

echoes on and on through silence

for ever.

Therefore, we might say that silence is not only a recurrent theme in war poetry, but also the signal of a new—or renewed—role played by women in society and culture: it is as if, thanks to war, ancient Sappho's archetype had acquired a renewed strength and the fall of the established character of the male writer had to be accompanied by a regenerated woman poet. It is not part of my intention to stress the feminist implication of this topic; nevertheless, it cannot be overlooked that poems written by women during the war reflect their personal views about it as filtered through their reacquired status of historic subjects.

2. Women's weapons: words

Traditionally war strategies and weapons have never fascinated women: useless, destructive, unfair, but above all "repulsive", foreign to the female nature which teaches that she who "produces life" in her own body chooses life and not death. Yet, although women appear less involved than men in the excitements of battle and danger, they do not seem to ignore this aspect in their response to war. Indeed, an attentive examination of war texts--both in poetry and prose--written by women testifies that women's role in relation to war is much more complex and certainly active than the literary tradition suggests. What female writers were eager to demonstrate throughout literature was the impossibility of feeling detached from any manifestation of that violence, oppression, unfairness of which too often women themselves have been victims. And war being the sum of these aspects, women have had something to say about it.

In fact, in 1856, some years before the outbreak of the American Civil War, the English poetess Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote *A Curse for a Nation*, a poem which is not an accusation against war but more specifically against slavery:

I heard an angel speak last night,
And he said "Write!
Write a Nation's curse for me,
And send it over the Western Sea."...

"Not so", I answered once again.
"To curse, choose men.
For I, a woman, have only known
How the heart melts and the tears run down."

"Therefore", the voice said, "shalt thou write

My curse tonight.

Some women weep and curse, I say

(And no one marvels), night and day."

"And thou shalt take their part tonight,

Weep and write.

A curse from the depths of womanhood

Is very salt, and bitter, and good"...¹³

The curse that the literary Angel wants the writer to pronounce--she being a woman--is addressed to the hypocrisy of America, a nation that, while it presented itself to the entire world as the symbol of freedom and justice, persisted in trampling on the human dignity of slaves in chains. The curse is, in fact, for this crime. Why, then, place this poem within a discussion upon women's writing about war? Is it only for a vehement attack on the *hate* contained in these lines? And indeed, in this respect, we cannot deny the value of these verses, since one of the merits of a poetic message is that it has several meanings and that it keeps its validity even out of the context in which it was conceived. But not only that. *A Curse for a Nation* is definitely an example of what Virginia Woolf called "the epic age of women's writing",¹⁴ when women's anger and rage was addressed against any kind of violence as well as oppression. If Elizabeth Barrett Browning's verses belong to this "epic age", nevertheless, it seems that more complex as well as urgent problems come up in that phase. They are problems that contribute to the nourishment of a "female tradition" which--though deeply changed--continues to the present day. In *A Curse for a Nation* the literary Angel authorises a "female" word which acquires power and validity just by being uttered by a woman. The

¹³ *The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1904), pp.519-20.

¹⁴ *A Room of One's Own*, Morag Shiach (ed.), (Oxford: World's Classics, 1992), p.103.

curse originated in "the depth of womanhood" is different from the one that might be pronounced by a man. At first, the writer asks her literary Angel "To curse, choose men. / For I, a woman, have only known/ How the heart melts and the tears run down". Yet, the Angel insists: "Therefore". It is the women's experience of sorrow and suffering--which made them weep and curse night and day--that makes it possible to judge and tell of the great misdeeds of the nation's through women's voices.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetic message was defined by herself as the necessity of assembling all the conventions, and so bursting into those places where "angels fear to tread" in order to face one's own historical time by telling the truth about it without false ornament. Yet, here rises the problem of the relationship between female writing and the theme of sorrow, between women's active participation or critical judgement and their attempt not to take part in certain dynamic aspects of war. Also, as has happened in the past, in war years we can fairly speak of a "salt, and bitter, and good" curse pronounced by a woman's mouth. For it can be argued that most women's war poetry contains within itself an explicit or sometimes implicit curse addressed to what or whom women consider as responsible for their own sufferings or, in a broader context, for mankind's devastating destructiveness. What else could Barbara Catherine Edwards' lines imply, while dramatically attempting to find a reasonable explanation for the absurdity of the war tragedy? Giving voice to feelings and sentiments shared by almost everyone she vehemently asks:

Whom shall we blame for the folly of war?

Whom shall we tell these stories for?

Who will believe

The sadness of death,

The terror, the fear, the emptiness-

What can they know

Of the vacant eyes

The sorrow too deep

In the heart that dies?¹⁵

The last line, with the strong emphasis given to the verb *dies* in the economy of the verse, and the effective image of the dying heart, vividly expresses the misery that is invading the whole of mankind during wartime. What strikes the reader here is the abolition of any difference between man and woman, young and old: all are victims in the same way and all are tragically experiencing similar sensations: sadness of death, terror, fear, emptiness. Fixed roles do not exist any longer and those *vacant eyes* might belong to the soldier--whose mind has gone blank because of the horrors he has seen--as well as to a bewildered child or woman who does not know what is going on. The difference here is not between men who fight and women who don't, but between those--men and women alike--who have seen the war and have lived it in all its ruinous manifestations, and those who will never be able to understand what war has really meant.

Through their poetic voices, then, many women intended to fight their personal battle against war; they did it on their own behalf as individuals and to make their voice resound in a chorus which could not be exclusively male. Their condition of wives, widows, mothers, nurses, refugees prevented them from being simply "observers" and made them rather "victims" of war and "reporters" of their personal stories. Poems as mirrors of their emotional upheaval, then; but also poems as testimonies of everlasting feelings and sentiments belonging to the heritage of the feminine gender and of all humankind. From this perspective it might be useful to verify the occurrence of the abovementioned archetypes in some samples of poetic production by British women writers. Needless to say, my choice is an arbitrary selection, since a complete analysis of women's poetry in wartime (or just during the Second World War) deserves a whole, independent survey. Therefore, my study will be confined to a restricted number of lyrics.

¹⁵ *Bomb Incident*, in Reilly, pp. 37-8.

2.1. The Penelope archetype

In Homer's *Odyssey* there is a large number of female characters, all endowed with beauty and extremely attractive features; nevertheless, none of them can outshine Penelope's virtues, the complex of feminine values constituting her *aretè*. Without any doubt, what makes Penelope a great woman is her patient endurance of loneliness and the loyalty to her inconstant and far-away husband: a sum of positive qualities that in the male-chauvinist frame of mind of ancient Greece was the embodiment of the perfect wife. This explains also the survival of the Penelope archetype throughout Western history and its revival during the two world wars.

My intention here is to identify the Penelopes hidden in some recent literary productions, and specifically in some remarkable poems focusing on that issue. My analysis does not concern simply the traditional figure of the "waiting woman", but embraces also some related themes like the pain of separation, and the remoteness of the lover: this emotional condition has led the writers to explore their feelings--both as human beings and as women--and to put them into words. Particularly significant, in this regard, is the lyric by Ursula Vaughan Williams that is emblematically entitled *Penelope* and sensitively expresses the pain of separation.

Certain parting does not wait its hour
for separation; too soon the shadow lies
upon the heart and chokes the voice, its power
drives on the minutes, it implies
tomorrow while today's is still here.

They sat by firelight and his shadow fell
for the last time, she thought, black patterning gold
sharp on the firelit wall. So, to compel
the evening to outlast the morning's cold

dawn by the quayside and the unshed tears,

he took a charred twig from the hearth and drew

the outline of his shadow on the wall.

'This were his features, this the hand I knew.'

She heard her voice saying the words through all

the future days of solitude and fear.¹⁶

The theme is introduced from the very outset and it is given strong emphasis by the repetition of the term "separation" (l.2) which follows "parting" (l.1). Moreover, by her placing of the word "certain", the poet seems to convey in the term "parting" the implication of a unique last moment, since it could mean a definite adieu. One of the distinctive aspects of this lyric is the occurrence of temporal references: "hour" (l.1), "soon" (l.2), "minutes" (l.4), "tomorrow" (l.5), "today" (l.5), "time" (l.7), "evening" (l.8), "morning" (l.8), "dawn" (l.10), "future days" (l.15). By frequently referring to time, the poet seems to underline its important value, as both lovers are perfectly aware that they will be far away from each other for a long time; hence, each second, each minute has to be consciously lived. Yet, suffering and sorrow for the imminent parting are so deep that they apparently take control over time (ll. 2-5). The future parting, so close in the lovers' eyes, constitutes an obsessive thought which prevents them from enjoying their last moments together. The contrasts between "tomorrow" and "today" (l.5) and between "evening", "morning" and "dawn" (ll. 8-9) effectively express the feeling of sadness as well as the restless flow of time. The present itself does not retain its own dimension, but becomes simply a prelude of tomorrow's separation. Also the polarity between the evening warmth of the firelight and the coldness of the imminent dawn (ll. 9-10) can be regarded as a mirror of the inner psychological condition of the characters: the former alludes to the happiness of being together and the latter to the cold feeling of loneliness and solitude. In this regard, it is worth noticing that the last line of the lyric represents the peak of the poet's emotional upheaval: she expresses there the uncomfortable awareness that solitude

¹⁶ Reilly, p.125.

and fear will characterise her life for ever. Paradoxically, the man who goes to the battlefield to protect his woman leaves her alone and defenceless because of his absence. Finally, particularly relevant is the occurrence of the term "shadow" in each strophe of the poem: the shadow of parting at the beginning vividly suggests the man's shadow, which represents for the speaker his only token. Moreover, the "shadow" so effectively depicted might be associated with the image of the dead man, whose essence survives as a shadow. The metaphorical implication of shadow as symbol of death is also emphasised by the employment of past tenses: "These were his features, this the hand I knew" (l.13), since the poetess cannot speak about her man in the present tense any longer.

The Penelope waiting and collecting memories of her last moments with her beloved might be regarded as emblematic of the desperate condition shared by millions of soldiers' wives. Yet, what renders this lyric different from some similar poetic productions is the apparent refusal of war's reality. Offering herself as a patient woman, she attempts to overcome the grief of separation by recollecting the "warm" past, without even expressing too openly her fear about her man's death. Like Odysseus' Penelope, the woman in the poem does not weep and complain, but bears the pain bravely; what is more, she apparently regards waiting as her task, without asking herself if it is right or not. It is her patient suffering that renders her a symbol of the female side of war: war is not even mentioned here, but silently obdurate. The personal tragedy of the writer is seen in retrospect, with vivid tones and yet detachment, as appears from the occurrence of the pronouns "they" (l.6) instead of "we" and "she" instead of "I" (ll. 7, 11, 14).

It seems to me that it is the chronological gap between the separation and the poetic recollection that has contributed to the atmosphere of silent desperation. Penelope focuses the tragedy not on the parting, but rather on "the future days of solitude and fear" (l.15), sentiments connoting her own war and not her soldier's one. The female quality of the daily domestic struggle finds in this poem its more modern and significant expression. On the other hand, the established archetype of the waiting woman occurs also in some other poems such as for instance Pamela Holmes' *Parting in April* and Anne Bulley's *Leave Poem*. The emotional peak of the former lies in the first lines of the second stanza:

The little death we die on this fair day

Points to that parting of a later spring; (l. 5-6)¹⁷

which is a clear exemplification of the theme. Yet the poem is filled with some literary images that place it in a well-established poetic tradition:

Now like my tears these April blossoms fall,

Borne on the wind, as fragile as a breath; (ll.12)

The poetess has emphasised the moment of departure instead of her following, lonely days, creating a poem that might have been written in any age or referring to whatever kind of separation. The same applies to *Leave Poem*:

O let the days spin out

In leisure, as the clouds pass;

...

Let nothing touch me now,

But the minty mountain air,

Sun, wind and your fingers

Through my hair.¹⁸

In my opinion, these two last lyrics treat the Penelope figure in accepted and therefore traditional terms, following the pattern of love poetry without emphasising too much the external contingency of war. Therefore, since the thought about war disappears in the melancholic memories of departure, we might say that the feminine attitude emerging here conforms to what the reader could expect from "farewell lyrics", rather than from particularly relevant "Second World War" poems. On the other hand, the modern Penelope

¹⁷ Ibid., p.61.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.22.

lives her solitude after the separation as her only way to experience war, revealing in her lamentation of loneliness and cold the immense suffering of the female struggle.

2.2 The Andromache archetype

Although not such a complex character as Penelope, the *Iliad*'s Andromache has been handed down in Western imagination as the embodiment of the young, courageous but defenceless war widow. After parting from her husband, Andromache waits and prays for him, watching the battle from the town walls, as any other good wife would do. Yet, unlike the faithful Penelope whose patience and loyalty are eventually awarded, she suddenly finds herself widow, with a baby (that will die soon) without father and completely alone.

Among British poems written by women during and about the Second World War, several lyrics are related to the Andromache archetype, giving voice to the sorrow and the pain felt by the modern embodiment of that ancient figure. Apparently, contemporary society has had several everyday female characters who, however physically far away from the battlefield, could not help feeling emotionally close to their men, while they themselves were living the tragic destiny of being war widows. Significantly, *War Widow* is the title of a poem by Margaret Hamilton Noël-Paton treating the motives of the lonely wife and the fatherless children:

I have grown old and dull and out of date.
The children--but they are not children now--
They have run so fast that I am tired,
Left, like a runner who could not stay the course,
Lagging behind.

They don't remember you: they think they do.
They were too young to know you never shared

Their baby world: that your keen, questing mind
Had other fields to travel.

You are not old and dull and out of date!
You are the spare young soldier who looks down
From the tall picture, painted that last leave.
They looked at you, and shrug, and their eyes say:
'He would have understood!'

I wonder... would you?

Had we grown old together,
I might have slid more gently into age;
You would have altered: touched by autumn's frost
To a more sober russet. As it is, you live
In the shrill green of youth, forever young,
As I last saw you--fifteen years today--
When you went back...to that:
And spring-time fled away.¹⁶

Although in our imagination Andromache is a young woman, we can easily imagine her growing "old and dull" during her future days of solitude, after her husband's death, exactly as has happened to the widow of the above poem. It is worth noticing that the first three verses each start with a personal pronoun: "I", "They", "You". By employing this

¹⁶ Ibid., p.92.

device, the author intends to emphasise the sole “subjects” of her personal, emotional world: her children, the memory of her husband constantly present to her mind. Her husband’s death has significantly meant not only her loneliness, but also the end of her youth and the beginning of a new, gloomy life as an “old and dull” mother distant from her young children. She is aware that they look at the portrait of their father, who with his timeless features, appears to be more understanding than their “out of date” mother; yet she feels her children cannot be blamed, since they have saved of their father the last image before his sudden, tragic death. The regret of not having grown old together constitutes the theme of the last verse, which ends vividly with the last memory of him still impressed on her mind despite time. It seems to me that the above lyric effectively reminds one of the traditional, literary *topos* of the lonely wife--in this case Andromache--weeping for her man dead on the dusty battlefield, while her happy past and promising future fade away.

At this point, it might be useful to analyse two more poems--*Epitaph on a Soldier* and *War Baby*--the content of which appears to be related to the previous poem and to the Andromache archetype. The former, a poem by Joyce Barton, evokes in the first stanza a mournful atmosphere corresponding to the image of the dead man lying in the battlefield, we have already mentioned.

In some far field my true-love lies,
His flooded heartblood growing cold;
The mask of death is on his eyes,
His life this day for freedom sold.

The frequent occurrence of the pronoun “his” in the lyric confers a personal dimension on the man-soldier in spite of his anonymous death.

Nor will his loss remembered be,
When others desecrate the truth
In later years, except by me--

For with his passing went my youth.¹⁷

The second stanza--particularly the final lines--shows close affinities with the lines of *War Widow*, since both express a lament for the soldier's wife's loss of youth.

The latter lyric, *War Baby*, by Pamela Holmes, deals in tender tones with the motive of a child who has lost his father in war:

He has not even seen you, he
Who gave you your mortality;
And you, so small, how can you guess
His courage or his loveliness?
Yet in my quiet mind I pray
He passed you on the darkling way--
His death, your birth, so much the same--
And holding you, breathed once your name.¹⁸

The woman's sorrow for her man's death becomes deeper as her baby will never be able to see his father. The whole poem is built on the polarity father and son, seen in the occurrence of the two pronouns "he" and "you" in the lyric. The wife-mother is attempting to imagine a spiritual contact between father and son, although she is sadly aware that they will never meet each other in ordinary life. Once again we find the celebration of the man-soldier mixed with the pain caused by the impossibility of changing the present circumstances.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.10.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.62.

2.3. The Hecuba archetype

According to Homer's epic, Andromache is to be considered victim twice, both as a wife and as a mother, having her child cruelly killed soon after his father's death. Nevertheless, it is Hecuba who is conventionally viewed as "the mother of heroes" *par excellence*. As the old Homeric queen mourned over her dead sons, forgetting in those moments all her maternal pride in their heroism, so other women in the last World War composed their threnodies both to commemorate and to lament the loss of their sons. Among the group of lyrics all dealing with this issue, particularly moving are the verses by Vera Bax, who lost two sons serving in the Royal Air Force. Yet, before examining those verses, it is worth underlining that, generally speaking, in any poem written by a mother-poet the aim to celebrate the glory of her son is subordinated to her weeping and crying over his death.

Vera Bax's sons were killed in action in 1942 and 1945, and on each of these tragic occasions she wrote a poem. These two poems obviously share some common features, such as the mother's will to go on despite her deep sorrow, as the only way to remember those who have died and to make their sacrifice worthwhile. Since the two lyrics, *To Richard my Son* (1942) and *To Billy my Son* (1945), appear to be similar to each other in both form and content, it seems to me useful to analyse them together, giving more emphasis to the second one. (For this reason I will quote only some lines of the former, but give the latter in full).

In *To Richard* we read:

I hide my grief throughout the weary days,

And gather up the threads of life again,

Remembering you ever gave your praise

To those for whom fate's hardest thrust was vain.¹⁹

¹⁹ Ibid., p.13.

The spirit and the memory of the dead son still linger among those fortunate soldiers who are still alive; to honour her son, then, she has to bear the pain and accept her destiny of struggling for survival. Nevertheless, despite her courageous decision (ll. 1-2), the poet is sadly aware that the duty she is so willing to perform--i.e. living--is extremely hard, since the sorrow and the pain of the loss overwhelm any other sentiment in a mother. This is what Vera Bax implies in her second lyric, *To Billy my Son*:

Now comes, indeed, the end of all delight,
The end of forward-looking on life's way,
The end of all desire to pierce the night
For gleam of hope, the end of all things gay;
The end of any promise Spring might hold,
The end of praying and, O God, the end of
Of love that waited to be shared and told;
Now, evermore, shall life with sorrow blend;
That sorrow whose dark shape the months had fought,
And strictly kept in confines of the will;
Had held quiescent while each conscious thought
Searched far horizons where joy lingered still;
But, my beloved, fearless, gallant, true,
Here is fair end of sorrow, now, for you.²⁰

The loss of her second son must have signified the real "end" of her life as a mother, as appears vividly from "the end of forward-looking on life's way" (l.2); this is the reason why the first lyric is centred on both the memories from her son's childhood and on her

²⁰ Ibid.

despair, while the second focuses on her own future days without any light. For her children death means the beginning of a new life or, at least, the "fair end of sorrow"; for her, their death implies full immersion in the dark realm of infinite, hopeless suffering: significantly, the word "end" is obsessively repeated (ll. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7). Now she knows that her life will be completely imbued with grief, as appears from the repetition of the term "sorrow" (ll. 8, 9, 14).

The value of Vera Bax's poems lies both in the artistic achievement and in the depth of feeling; therefore, I have chosen those two examples as emblematic of maternal pain and of the presence of the Hecuba archetype in much Second World War poetry. It seems to me that there is in the above poems the coexistence of old and new elements concerning this archetype, the former being the cry over the dead, the latter the self-pity the mother expresses for herself. This kind of suffering, for a mother, signifies to be deprived of everything: the mother needs her children to continue living and bear all the burdens imposed by life as much as her children needed her when they were defenceless babies. By giving voice to all despair about loss and about herself, the poetess seems to have personified truly the modern embodiment of the Homeric Hecuba and of the endless series of anonymous mothers all mourning over their soldier-sons during all ages of mankind.

2.3. The Amazon archetype

Women are traditionally regarded as "life-givers" rather than "life-takers",²⁴ and on the base of this "maternal" principle--according to which life in a feminine frame of mind has to be chosen in place of death under any circumstances--women are commonly viewed as representatives of pacifism. Yet the mythological image of the beautiful Penthesilea and her Amazon companions capable of fighting against Achilles and his warriors corresponds, although in a limited way, to some female "soldiers" who played an active part in battlefields

²⁴ See for instance Elshtain, *Women and War*, pp.163-258.

during the Second World War. In this regard, it is worth underlining that female participation in all kinds of wartime activities was particularly relevant in the last conflict: as will be seen in the following chapters, women worked in war factories, farms, hospitals and so on, performing tasks normally considered male. All these jobs marked their entry into the *male zone*, but none of them can be compared to the most revolutionary female achievement in wartime, i.e. the presence of women wielding weapons and employing violence like men. It goes without saying that these women soldiers retained neither the heroic attributes of the Amazons nor, generally speaking, the complex bulk of male ideals connoting the traditional masculine approach to war. Their characters must have been a peculiar interweaving of feminine and masculine, and in my opinion it is hard to say which components led them to the battlefield. It is not my intention to treat the topic of the relationship between female soldiers and violence (a theme that has already been debated by some scholars) and of the actual circumstances of their involvement in the fighting both on the British and the Italian side. What might be interesting, however, is to consider briefly the survival or rather the “re-birth” of the *woman warrior* in Western imagination during the Second World War. As in the cases of the previous archetypes, the basis for enquiry will be provided by some British poems from the last conflict.

I remember waking
from a sort of sleep,
khaki-clad and rigid on the canvas bed,
gas mask already slung
like an obscene shoulder-bag;
torch in one hand, tin hat in the other,
and the blasted buzzer shaking
the waking brain to jelly,
mercilessly dragging the tired body up

out of exhausted oblivion.²²

This is the first strophe of a poem entitled *Flashback* by Lois Clark, who—as appears from this and from some other lyrics collected by Reilly, such as *Evening in Camp* by Patricia Ledward²³--belonged to a women's auxiliary corps in the British army. The first line contains the verb referring to her artistic inspiration: "I remember", by which she seems to relate the lyric to the established field of poetry, where memories and recollections are among the most common sources of inspiration. Yet the following words create a strong contrast with this "poetic" beginning, since they portray a picture which is definitely prosaic: it is the woman-soldier waking up at night for a military action together with her male companions, fully equipped like them in a fashion which does not have anything of the feminine or "pacific". The khaki uniform, the gas mask, the torch, the tin hat, the rubber boots belong to the modern image of the soldier, constituting a character far removed from a full feminine archetype and different from any other possible incarnation of female warriors. The author appears aware of the unusual role she is playing in the theatre of war; this might explain her mentioning all these items of war equipment. On the other hand, as expressed clearly in this very first strophe, finding herself in the battlefield has been a shocking experience, although we might suppose she enlisted voluntarily. The strong emotion felt in the circumstances described in the lyric finds its signal in the alliterative words "blasted buzzer" and in the strong sensation suggested by "shaking the waking brain to jelly", clearly referring to a universe completely foreign to any "pacific" female archetype as well as to the above characterisations of wartime women.

The following lines mirror the baffled reaction of her male colleagues: "Now lads, remember there's a lidy in the car", together with a reference to their "cockney curses". By quoting the strong language used by the soldiers, Lois Clark creates a contrast between what

²² Reilly, p.26.

²³ Ibid., pp 78-9.

a reader could expect from a female protagonist of war--sensitivity, tender feelings, tears and laments--and the cruel reality she is thrust into, the unusual surroundings with which she has to cope. The remainder of the poem sees a restless description of martial actions, all told through the bewildered voice of a woman who has had experience of a battlefield for the first time. The final point is represented by three lines that seem to reflect, in their phonetic poignancy, the ambiguous attitude of the poetess towards war:

roaring down to disaster
where the bomb-ploughed houses wait
with their harvest of casualties.

Clark underlines her awareness of the absolute lack of logic characterising war: disaster, bomb attacks, casualties are simply the statement of the endless power of violence, so destructive and irrational that no reason could ever be given for it. Nevertheless, while giving voice to the archetypal female vision of war, she incarnates also the male attitude towards it: in fact, only this kind of approach might explain her decision to take an active role in martial enterprises.

At this point, we might conclude that during the history of mankind the development of social and cultural structures brought about an evolution in female behaviour and demeanour in wartime, leading to the rebirth of the old and forgotten character of the woman soldier. Yet it is worth underlining that the striking novelty represented by women's auxiliary corps in some Western countries during the Second World War is not simply the product of female evolution and acquiring new, "virile" features but rather the consequence of changes that happened in human society. Therefore, the occurrence of the Amazon archetype in some parts of European and Anglo-American literature might be regarded as caused by the world's falling into an abyss of violence. Setting aside the possible cases of women who actually enjoyed being soldiers, it seems to me that the feminine gender has viewed war very much in the same way as Clark: a "dirty", cruel and stupid violence which nevertheless sometimes needs to be fought by using its own means. In a word, we might say that female participation in martial actions constitutes unequivocal proof of the impossibility of solving conflicts by the

use of peace only. Recent events have testified to the terrible truth that sometimes it is necessary to employ violence in order to re-establish peace: women soldiers of the Second World War appear to have been aware of this, anticipating in their deeds one of the most common views of war in contemporary culture.

2.4. The others: nurses, workers and bomb victims

Apart from the above quoted groups of war poems dealing with "archetypes", it is possible to identify in Reilly's collection some poetical themes which apparently do not belong to any of the previous types. A large number of lyrics deals with the female characterisation of war victims, who--since war on the home front in Britain basically meant air-raids--were mainly victims of bomb attacks. Among them one of the most representative is *Still Falls the Rain* by Edith Sitwell, who, referring to the raids in 1940, creates a long poem built on metaphors and images from religion: the Rain (the "bomb-rain") falls on the Cross, the Tomb, the Field of Blood, Cain and the Starved Man, for it destroys the fundamentals of mankind and civilisation. The terrible destruction and human loss brought about by bombs is regarded as the most tragic event ever to happen to human beings, and therefore comparable to the drama of Christ's death. Yet, in Sitwell's poetic transfiguration of bombing it is possible to discover an attempt at finding an explanation for war horrors; more precisely, the poet seems to see a sort of remedy for the world's redemption in a return to the Christian principles of love and brotherhood.

Then sounds the voice of One who like the heart of man

Was once a child who among beasts has lain--

'Still do I love, still shed my innocent light, my Blood, for thee.'²⁴

²⁴ Ibid., pp.114-15.

Although Edith Sitwell represents a peculiar voice inside the collection, being a well-known poet among a series of anonymous ones, it seems to me that she can be considered emblematic of women's need to find a sort of justification of death in war. Hence, the killing of thousands of people under the bombardments is presented as an inescapable tragedy, something which has to be accepted as Christ himself accepted his self-sacrifice. *The Bombers* by Sarah Churchill,²⁵ *The Bomber* by Beatrice R. Gibbs,²⁶ *In War* by Gladys M. Haines²⁷ and others all treat the same theme—however, without any religious implications. A common feature linking them is to be found in the fact that for the poetesses the reality of bomb destruction and death was in total contrast with the pacific atmosphere they were still longing for and imagining in wartime. In their eyes war's reality has to change in order to be accepted: so the bombs become "Delicate instruments, dead-weight ton", the pilot's face is that of "a boy who has just left school";²⁸ the bomber comes "White moon setting and red sun waking",²⁹ in the magic atmosphere of dawn; the poet lies down in peace, while "All night the bombers roared about the sky",³⁰ recreating, as in the above examples, the peace and quiet which they hope to see again after the war. The passivity of these female writers is shared by millions of women who had to be helpless spectators of tragedies which they could bear only by looking forward in hope to the return of peacetime.

On the other hand, active participation in war has been attested to by some lyrics presenting female figures involved in hospital nursing, and working in war factories and on farms. Women who might belong also to the above archetypes--being mothers, wives and

²⁵ Ibid., p.24.

²⁶ Ibid., p.48.

²⁷ Ibid., p.56.

²⁸ Sarah Churchill, op.cit.

²⁹ Beatrice R. Gibbs, op. cit.

³⁰ Gladys M. Haines, op. cit.

fiancées of soldiers--could not avoid feeling the duty to contribute to their country's destiny and, as will be seen in the third chapter, played an active role in the field. Among the reasons which compelled them to take this important step was the sense of guilt they felt towards their men, and this sentiment fills poems such as *The Infinite Debt* by Rachael Bates³¹ and *Threnode for Young Soldiers Killed in Action* by Juliette de Bairacli-Levy.³² In the former, which is built on the contrast between the words "stranger" and "me" ("A stranger died for me" l.1), the emotional peak is reached in the last stanza:

All life, all love's his fee
Whose perished fire conserves my spark,
Who bought the brightening day for me
And for himself, the dark.

The same motif appears in the latter lyric, which represents a sort of author's self-questioning about the impossibility of paying her debt of gratitude:

How can I perform sufficient penance?
What of long fastings and a crown of thorns?
Could prayers and sackcloth ever suffice?
No not enough! oh not nearly enough!
Only my life would be fair sacrifice.

The writers' sentiments are so powerfully expressed in the above poems that any further comment might seem impertinent. Nevertheless, it seems worth emphasising that the attitude manifested here does not seem to be a new "trend" in women's conception of war, since--as has been pointed out by Jennifer Clarke in *Know This is Your War: British Women*

³¹ Ibid., p.11.

³² Ibid., p.8.

*Writers and the Two World Wars*³³--, throughout the continuous sequence of conflicts characterising our history one of the most common female feelings towards war has been the sense of guilt and inadequacy. Needless to say, from the First to the Second World War there must have been an extraordinary change in women's condition and a new awareness of their roles in society. We might suppose that this process has started almost invisibly, investing women's frame of mind rather than their actual behaviour; the compelling circumstances represented by the last conflict must have constituted a suitable environment for the exploitation of these virtual female "powers", at least in some countries like Britain where culture and society were ready to accept the change.

As will be seen from written reports quoted and commented on the third chapter of this thesis, in Britain active female participation in war was a matter of fact. Significantly, testimonies of the new part played by women has also been given poetic embodiment: for instance, in Ada Jackson's *Blessed Event*--which deals with the death of a woman doctor while performing her duty³⁴--, in Diana James's *The Munition Workers*--where the poetess recreates the sounds and the atmosphere of a war factory³⁵--, in Naomi Mitchison's *The Farm Woman: 1942*--which describes a woman proud of her work in spite of her physical inadequacy to it³⁶--and in some others contained in Reilly's anthology.

³³ See p. 8.

³⁴ Reilly, p.64: In labour when / the raid began / she could not run / as others run /. Now here shall be / no infant's cry, / no navel string / to cut and tie, / she being--by / a bomb well sped-- / delivered of / her soul instead.

³⁵ Ibid., p.65: They sat upon a hill, / They could forget / The dark oppressive roof-tops of the town. / They drank their fill; / The buttercups were wet; / The evening sunlight, webbed and mystical, / Transfused the iron bands that were clamped down / On their right hair; the fetters of the mill / Became a circlet and a coronet. / The wheels poised and the hammers were laid still. / But now the night is deep, / The caverns burn, / The great machine is grinding in a dream. / They cannot weep / The coronet is ster, / The fountain of their tears had ceased to gleam: / Somewhere men die; somewhere the waters churn / With flame consumed; somewhere the bullets teem / In this dark night, and wreath their brows with iron, / With the dread weight of an eternal sleep.

³⁶ Ibid., pp.89-90: Why the blue bruises high up on your thigh, / on your right breast and both knees? / ...Never tell the men, they will only laugh and say / What use would a woman be! / But I read the war news through, every day; / It means my honour to me, / Making the crops to grow. / And so, and so, / Said the farm woman: / but I bruise easy.

In conclusion it seems to me that from the above poems it is possible to detect women's conception of war as manifested in some poetical works. In this chapter only a small choice of examples has been mentioned, and yet--despite the arbitrary quality of any kind of selection--the growth of a new female identity inside well-established cultural and behavioural codes (our "archetypes") can be outlined through British lyrical poetry. In this regard, a last point seems worth making: during the years of the Second World War not all countries and cultures were ready to express a modern vision of women's role in society; hence, only in limited cases did women themselves give voice to their feelings and ideas about the violence, death and destruction caused by the conflict. In the broad context of Western nations, Great Britain represents a "modern" state, where female characters were attributed already a certain "political" weight which was very far from the male chauvinism dominating other countries like Italy. This accounts for the almost total lack of Italian poetesses writing during and about the Second World War; nevertheless, in Italy the tragic course of martial events was mirrored by and commented on in some works by female authors belonging to different literary genres. Among them, the poignant novel dealing with a real "woman warrior" fighting in the Resistance: *L'Agnese va a morire* by Renata Viganò, which offers the topic for my second chapter.

CHAPTER II

L'AGNESE VA A MORIRE: THE SILENT WARRIOR

On a September evening, Agnese on her way back from the wash-house with her load of washing on the wheelbarrow met a soldier in the cornfield.¹

This is the beginning of one of the most representative Italian novels about the Second War. Written in 1949 by a female writer--Renata Viganò--who played an active role in the Resistance, this work seems to be an authentic and touching testimony of that period rather than an artistic product in the accepted meaning of the word. This is the reason why it might constitute a good sample of this literary genre as it developed in tormented historical and artistic circumstances during the War. From the very first words, this novel displays a mixture of literary features (*on a September evening* might remind one of the *once upon a time* of fairy tales) and everyday elements which represents the original aspect of war fiction in general. The following analysis will consider the plot, the maternal aspects of the main character, Agnese and her relationships with both male and female characters in the novel. Although the unusual conjunction of formal literary features with everyday domestic routine might constitute an interesting aspect to be developed in an examination of female war fiction, this work will rather deal with *Agnese va a morire* in its more visible features. Indeed, a careful study of the above elements--'literature' and daily life in a novel--might constitute a

¹ Renata Viganò, *L'Agnese va a morire* (Torino:Einaudi,1994), p.11: Una sera di settembre l'Agnese tornando a casa dal lavatoio col mucchio di panni bagnati sulla carriola, incontrò un soldato nella cavedagna.

fruitful line of enquiry in war fiction *by* and *about* women and in the development of female writing. Yet, such a wide and complex subject will need a thorough examination to be carried out in an entire thesis (and not to be restricted to a chapter).

Renata Viganò, in an article published in the literary columns of the newspaper *L'Unità* on 17th November 1949, points out that the main character, Agnese, is a woman she had met while they were both fighting in the Resistance. In fact, the novelist supported her husband, becoming herself a partisan under the mock name of La Contessa (The Countess) and lived through, as a protagonist, all the dreadful events she describes in the book, which as a result appears to have a twofold meaning: the fact that it is both *by* a woman writer and *about* a woman fighter is in a way emblematic of female involvement on the battlefield. Therefore, the problem of this double identity, and the related uncovering of the characters acting as spectator and actor, might be the first topic to treat.

2.1 The Plot

On the first page of the novel, the name of the protagonist occurs four times, each time without any adjective and before the verb: *l'Agnese tornando a casa* (Agnese coming back home); *l'Agnese si sentì stanca* (Agnese felt tired); *l'Agnese si slegò il fazzoletto* (Agnese untied her headscarf); *l'Agnese piegò la sua schiena rigida e grassa* (Agnese bent her stiff and fat back). These examples underline the extreme conciseness of the style and the absolute lack of adjectives to characterise in a more “literary” way the figure of the protagonist. Rejecting the traditional rules according to which literature needs more elaborate rhetorical devices, the author makes of her character a common woman, described briefly through her human--and therefore imperfect--actions and not through the emphasis on her physical or moral qualities. Hence, Agnese is perfectly placed in that atmosphere of bare reality which is related to the broader context of fiction only by the temporal dimension implied in the indication of the day. The result is a page apparently belonging to reports rather than to traditional literature. So what has happened to both the heroines and the weak female figures inhabiting novels and romances since the first manifestations of this literary genre? It

seems that, as in the case of poetry, routine habits and trivial gestures have replaced the fixed archetypes of superiority marking literary characters. Routine has invaded even the reports from wartime and war itself is presented without any literary connotation, as best exemplified by this novel. The reading of war through the established martial iconography has been replaced by a completely new approach that appears remote from the old ideas of courage, virile strength and heroism. This is the reason why a clumsy, middle-aged woman such as Agnese can become the protagonist of a novel.

The book can be regarded as the chronicle of a housewife's route from archetyped female roles to a heroic--although quiet--death in war. The setting is in an unnamed village in the north of Italy, remote from the usual descriptions of battle fronts, although it is not at all presented as a home front. The years are the ones after the fall of Mussolini, when Italy became a land torn and devastated by two wars, against both Germany and the Allied forces: an unforeseen tragedy which was to transform the whole country into a chaotic battlefield. Of all these political and historical events, Agnese appears almost unaware: the reason why she finds herself among partisans seems to have nothing to do with abstract ideals or precise opinions about the present conflict. Agnese is animated by a silent and yet strong sentiment of right and wrong, by her stubborn attachment to her land and by a quiet and deep love for her husband and for the young men she looks after as a mother.

The story begins with her welcoming a young soldier into her house: her husband Palita, talking with him, portrays the young Agnese he married, a beautiful woman of whom he is clearly still very fond. Though expressed in an indirect and completely prosaic way, the love between husband and wife is the main feeling dominating their simple life. Agnese and Palita are two peasants who have lived in the countryside since they were born, obeying the rules nature imposes on the rhythms of seasons and fieldwork. Even if their youth is evoked with nostalgia through Palita's words, it was not at all the idyllic life one might suppose; nevertheless, in spite of the difficulties and the poverty of those years, the past appears to be an idealised time falling apart with the outbreak of the war. Agnese's life changes from a wife's and housewife's dull--yet lovingly accepted--routine to a partisan's brave fight, and the change starts the very day she welcomes the soldier. In fact, he is a deserter and the Germans

are after him: it is when she sees the young man and her husband--who has protected him--taken away by the enemy that her role of acquiescent bystander turns into that of active participant on the stage of the Resistance. The following pages describe in a sober style Agnese's awakening: at the beginning she collaborates with the partisans simply by delivering messages (because of her age and sex nobody would ever guess she is a "staffetta", a messenger); then, when she hears about her husband's death on the way to a concentration camp in Germany, she leaves her house and is determined to put her own life at risk for the sake of the young partisans. Her unexpressed rage against the Germans who have been killing thousands and thousands of "good", innocent people--among them her affectionate Palita--finds its outlet for an apparently "trivial" reason: it is when a German soldier kills her cat for no reason that she cannot contain her hatred. Agnese, who has accepted the loss of her husband with apparent resignation, now overreacts and hits the German, the personification of war and inexplicable violence. Scared of herself and afraid of a German retaliation, she escapes to join a group of partisans operating in the area. At this point, her personality has acquired a deeper quality: her gestures openly display her commitment and her awareness of being the mother of all those "boys", the partisans she cannot help considering her children. From a simple-minded woman, whose only identity consisted in her roles of devoted wife and tireless worker, she becomes a brave, yet humble, fighter and, above all, a caring mother silently performing her duty. Her life is now led on the dangerous battlefield of the civil war and all her unexpressed sentiments and emotions are connected to her and her *children's* actions. In the rest of the novel, Agnese's story identifies itself with the long series of war events and courageous attacks of the partisans she is living with: hence she can rightly be regarded as the embodiment of the collective participation in the Resistance. At this point, then, her significance goes well beyond the mere narration of the facts constituting the novel: it is in her increasing awareness of the complete stupidity of war and, in spite of this, in her sacrifice for the ideals of love and right that, unexpectedly, she becomes a heroic figure. Her death in the last page is nothing but the supreme sacrifice of a woman embodying the sentiments of an entire community and the proof of women's strength: in a word, the undeniable statement of the heroic possibility of a *female war*.

2.2 Agnese: the mother of the soldier

She knew that this life was not going to last. They had been fighting side by side for a long time, had performed several good actions, but nothing had really happened: no death, no wounds, no injuries, no traitors; a happy time. But, during war, happy times are short and are followed by misfortunes. She felt sorry for Rina--the girl was so worried--and for the Comandante and Clinto and for all the partisans. She had behaved with them as a mother, but without any rhetoric, without saying: I'm your mother. This fact had to come out through her gestures, her work: to cook for them, to care about their needs, to do their washing and everything necessary for their welfare. They did not say much, but they were happy to keep her. If someone lost his temper and shouted at her, all the others would tell him off and afterwards--without apologising, since words are useless--he would become kind and speak politely.²

This passage summarises Agnese's role among the partisans, as she herself sees it. The first lines, indeed, report her thought about war and her sad awareness that there cannot be any good in it. Finding herself in great danger--she is hiding together with the young Rina from a troop of Germans--she recollects her last memories from her present life, enabling the reader to realise the deep significance of her mission. First of all, *she feels sorry*: the condition of feeling sympathetic is the source of her courage and her apparently trivial deeds. Agnese is consciously part of a large community turned upside down by violence. Deprived of her only

² Ibid., p.92: Lei lo sapeva che questa vita non era fatta per durare. Stavano insieme da tanto, avevano eseguito molte belle azioni, e mai niente era accaduto, nè morti nè feriti nè malati nè traditori: un tempo fortunato. Ma in guerra i tempi fortunati sono brevi, dopo cominciano i guai. Le dispiaceva per la Rina, che era tanto in pensiero, e per il Comandante e per Clinto e per tutti i partigiani. Era stata con loro come la mamma, ma senza retorica, senza dire: io sono la vostra mamma. Questo doveva venir fuori coi fatti, col lavoro. Preparargli da mangiare, che non mancasse niente, lavare la roba, muoversi sempre perchè stessero bene. Neppure loro dicevano molte parole, ma erano contenti, la tenevano volentieri. Se qualcuno per impazienza alzava la voce con lei, gli altri lo sgridavano, e lui non chiedeva scusa, ma diventava buono, le parlava con gentilezza.

objects of affection--her husband, her cat and her small house--she can give significance to her life just by renouncing her personal needs and desires: in a way, by becoming "a woman without qualities" in the nineteenth-century meaning of the phrase. In the first part of the novel, she clearly does not share any of her husband's political ideas; what is more, she does not even care about knowing them. Her world, consisting of everyday simple tasks and quiet joys, has nothing to do with the external reality of politics and great historical events. Nevertheless, when this foreign intrusion comes to destroy her small circle of habits and certainties, she cannot help taking a more active role. In fact, it is this and not any political consciousness that determines the following changes in her simple, primitive life. Her participation in the dangerous life of the partisans and her sacrifices are the means by which significance is given to her solitude:

She never stopped to think about what to do after the war. She hoped it would be over soon for the sake of "those boys", so that no one else would die and they all would go home. But she did not have her home any longer, she did not have Palita, she did not know where to go.³

As appears clearly from the previous passages, she acts silently out of affection, since affection and love are the real values hidden behind her confessed sympathy. This is the reason why she is a fighter without having any of the great qualities normally associated with this part: far from being an embodiment of the Amazon archetype--an archetype which has been largely confined in Western culture to mythological literature--, Agnese is the personification of the more common *Hecuba archetype*, i.e. the "mother" of the soldier.

Yet it is worth underlining that at the beginning of the novel she appears as the wife, reminding us rather of *Andromache's* than of *Hecuba's* archetype: in the very first pages her husband dies because of the war, and his memory will accompany her day and night. Nevertheless, unlike *Andromache*, Agnese does not have any concern with glory and the

³ Ibid., p.142: Non pensava mai a quello che avrebbe fatto dopo la guerra. Ne desiderava la fine per <<quei ragazzi>>, che non morisse più nessuno, che tornassero a casa. Ma lei non aveva più la casa, non aveva più Palita, non sapeva dove andare.

Greek concept of *Kleos* (honour in war as a means to survive after war) and has never thought about her husband as a hero. She cannot see anything heroic in Palita's death and, at the same time, does not possess any literary knowledge which might suggest to her a heroic vision of war (although the Second World War is certainly much more a 'mass' event and hence 'unheroic' compared to the elitist epic battles).

Therefore, as has already been said, she behaves as a real mother for the young partisans, and in this regard she might be seen as an embodiment of Hecuba. Here, it is worth stressing that Agnese's maternal role shows some differences from other 'war' mothers. If compared to Vera Bax⁴, for instance, Agnese appears to be much more simple-minded, on the one hand, and therefore much more pragmatical, on the other. She does not have the faintest idea about glory and heroic death: death is inescapable in war, is a necessary sacrifice to perform in pursuing freedom and has nothing to do with glory. On the other hand, Agnese--who, it should be emphasised, is not the 'biological' mother of 'her' children--can be sincerely affectionate and loving, can react to the loss of the young soldiers and can perform an active and extremely useful role--instead of being only a mourning mother who survives to honour her son's memory.⁵ Yet, it cannot be denied that Agnese acts as a mother and this fact alone accounts for her being an embodiment of what might be called the Hecuba archetype.

Having so many children, she cannot be scared when they leave for some action; in fact, she realises that fear would be paralysing, preventing her from performing her duties. Too old and heavy to go and fight in the darkness of the mountains, Agnese's task is to stay "home" and keep it warm and cosy, recreating the familiar atmosphere the partisans had left long before. Paradoxically, she is a sort of "angel in the house" in a place--the refuge called La Caserma (The Barracks)--which effectively is the denial of any house; yet she comprehends that even grown-ups need to be cared for, especially if they have been separated from their families. Families retain some values that war has partially destroyed, as everyone

⁴ See p.38-9

⁵ See p. 38-9

who has experienced the Second World War knows; therefore, Agnese's aim is to do her best in order to offer "her" soldiers the illusion of belonging to a large family group. There is no rhetoric in her task, and no words are necessary, especially because she perfectly realises the fact that there is still something above "maternal" or familial care: it is the "idea" for which they are all fighting and which in her simple but undeniable logic means "to re-establish good values and right law and defeat the cruel Germans". At the same time, she does not expect anything in return: no thanks, no polite expressions are the reward she is longing for. Her solace comes from her awareness of being useful, no matter what the danger and--sometimes--the rudeness shown by the Comandante and some others towards her.

Agnese rebukes the young Rina because she thinks more of family ties than of war:

"Do you think the wife is important, when one fights in the war? We are in war, you know". Then she added with a serious face: "If the Comandante has given this order, it means that it is right".⁶

The Comandante is the repository of "war-wisdom", a quality which is, above everything else, the force linking men and women in their common struggle against the evil. Yet he is not at all a paternal figure, since he does not seem to bother about the material needs of his men; moreover--although he appreciates Agnese's abnegation and intelligence--he does not make any distinction between the sexes or weak and strong, old and young: they all have to obey in order to put *the ideal* into reality. The harsh features of this character, by contrast, appear to emphasise the more tender qualities of the mother Agnese, who--despite her words to Rina and her total commitment to *the ideal*--cannot help being silently affectionate and caring. It is as if her devotion and her cleverness in carrying out actions and military strategies were not--or not only--due to her belief in the rightness of the Resistance, but chiefly to her human qualities. Might we infer that her peculiar behaviour depends on her female nature? It seems to me that it would be far too easy a positive answer; nevertheless, from the following closer look at her male and female companions, this appears to be the case.

⁶ Ibid., p.94: -Tu ti credi che conti la moglie quando uno è in guerra? Qui siamo in guerra, sai- e aggiunse, col viso severo: -E se il Comandante ha ordinato così, è segno che va bene così-.

2.3 The male companions

The only authority Agnese knows in the struggle is represented by the Comandante, the leader of the whole group of partisans operating in the area. He is the one in connection with the hierarchy of the Resistance "army", the one who has a deeper political understanding of the current situation; moreover, being educated--he is a lawyer--he is supposed to possess that insight and military knowledge necessary to his charge. All these qualities are evident even to Agnese's simple eyes, which give the perspective through which this character is described:

She knew that he was called "the lawyer", that he was an educated man from the city; he hated the fascists and for this reason he had been jailed, and afterwards he had been to Russia and Spain. And now she was scared of him, of his almost sweet voice, of the words he would say. Certainly, he was going to tell her off..⁷

Everyone respects his opinions and obeys his orders, including Agnese, who is regarded even by him as "the mother". In fact, he seems to be endowed with the authority characterising a general, and in this respect he does not appear far from the archetyped role of the "leader of armies": the archetypes of the endless series of "good" generals--from the wise Nestor of the *Iliad* and the Roman *dux exercitum* to the modern embodiments of this character in the literary and real officials fighting in the Great War--are still alive in this novel. Lacking the links and rules regulating the work of a proper army, the Comandante has to develop all his natural qualities to gain his men's fidelity and obedience: he has to show them what is wrong and what is right, to rebuke and praise, to comfort and lead into action. Agnese herself, as we have seen in her words to Rina, cannot escape from feeling awe and deference towards him, especially due to the gap separating a younger, cultivated "citizen" from an older, ignorant woman from the countryside. Nevertheless, when it comes to more relevant human qualities, she cannot avoid being critical because of her inner--though unconfessed--moral superiority

⁷ Ibid., p.57: Sapeva che lo chiamavano "l'avvocato", che era uno istruito, un uomo della città, che aveva sempre odiato i fascisti, e per questo era stato in prigione, e poi in Russia e in Ispagna. E adesso aveva una grande paura di lui, della sua voce quasi dolce, delle parole che avrebbe pronunciate. Certo doveva sgridarla...

over him; indeed, his role leads him to estimate the value of a victory or of a loss simply in military terms, regardless of the fact that behind the mere numbers of the dead there is the tragedy of human beings left in the battlefield as well as on the home front:

“Someone is dying over there, too”. Agnese thought. Who will survive this war?” “Fifteen plus five, twenty less in the troop”--the Comandante said--“but ‘they’ have got two hundred less. The sum is right”...All of a sudden, Agnese thought: “The Comandante is heartless.” That was the first time she realised it. “He is never touched, he never feels involved when something bad happens. He smiles and who is dead is dead.”⁸

The main difference between the two lies in their opposite kinds of involvement in the facts dramatically taking place under their eyes. The Comandante’s reaction--remote from any passionate upheaval--maintains the necessary distance which enables him to continue fighting at the expense of the emotional sides of his personality. Therefore, though a good general, he is also an imperfect human being, since he appears devoid of the more “human” qualities in an individual: Agnese’s opinion, indeed, is based on moral criteria that for her play a central role in the making of a man. Naturally, her thought is not sophisticated enough to take into account further aspects of the Comandante’s personality and to reach a deeper understanding of his behaviour; yet the reader cannot help agreeing with her, without considering his undeniable ability in the military field. On the other hand, Agnese appears as good as he does in performing her tasks, even though this does not mean her rejection of human feelings like love, sympathy, understanding and so on. She has become a fighter--even without wielding weapons--but she has not forgotten her true nature, taking into her new reality the old habits, tasks and, above all, emotions. It is the coexistence of all these different levels of identity that renders Agnese a far more complex character than any other in the novel, giving her a gigantic dimension unusual for a woman in war literature. In the chaotic scenery of Italy

⁸ Ibid., p.152:-Qualcuno muore anche laggiù,-pensava l’Agnese.-Chi resterà vivo dopo questa guerra?-Quindici e cinque venti di meno nella brigata,-disse il Comandante,-ma “loro” sono in duecento di meno. Il conto torna-...-Il Comandante è cattivo,-pensò l’Agnese a un tratto, ed era la prima volta che le veniva in mente.-Non si commuove, non gli dispiace quando succede una disgrazia. Fa un sorriso, e chi è morto è morto-.

during the Second World War, it might be that no-one would have imagined the total involvement of women both on the home front and on the battlefields (when these were on the mountains and the valleys of North Italy during the Resistance). The tragic course of the military events in Italy led to completely unusual behaviour in women who *perforce* had to develop new skills and life-styles in order to be of help. Agnese's story is emblematic of this necessity, which was felt especially in some social environments (the lower classes) and, particularly, in specific geographical areas. What happened to those women was that their personalities all of a sudden had to acquire gestures and aspects traditionally labelled as masculine; nevertheless, their strength lay in the stratified heritage of the history of women: the endurance of long work, patience, submission, the spirit of sacrifice. All these features constitute Agnese's greatness and make of her both a good soldier--according to the fixed male archetype--and a perfect "moral" supporter: the traditional role of wives, daughters and mothers of fighters.

Agnese's skills are so impressive that even the Comandante cannot avoid realising it, as is demonstrated by his words to his companions on some occasions, when her brilliant intuitions and her courage save their lives. Nevertheless, he never praises her openly, and once he regrets not having done it:

"Listen, Clinto. Do you think I've been wrong with Agnese? You know, she is better than everybody else here, though she has made a mistake now, poor woman. Yet, her mistake is a sign of her extraordinary courage. She is absolutely great...You see, I regret not having told Agnese what I think of her. I've never praised her as she deserves. At least, I could tell her how important she's always been...What she's done for the band, for the party, for us all. I should have told her, since we're going to be far away, now. And I should have also told her that everybody'll know it, as soon as we are free. I will tell everybody who she is."⁹

⁹ Ibid., pp. 225-6:-Senti Clinto. Ti pare che ho fatto male con l'Agnese? Pensa che è lei la più brava, anche se ha sbagliato, povera vecchia. Anzi appunto perchè ha sbagliato, sempre un errore di troppo coraggio, sempre meravigliosa...Sai, mi pento di non averle detto quello che penso di lei. Non le ho mai dato molta soddisfazione. Farle capire almeno quanto ci ha servito...; che cosa ha fatto per la compagnia, per il partito,

We might suppose that one of the reasons why the Comandante has never shown his admiration for Agnese lies in his bewilderment in front of such a good, and unusual, soldier. She does not seem to be the kind of woman characterised by striking features; therefore, the last thing one could expect from her is her exceptionality on the sidelines of the battlefield: a complete novelty in a culture where, for ages, female involvement in war had meant the preservation of the home front by passively waiting, hoping and crying.

Agnese herself does not recognise her female identity in the task she is performing. Hence, she cannot believe that, a poor woman, she is really able to give a hand to all those brave men fighting for the sake of the entire country:

Agnese kept on nodding, saying yes, but she thought that every word was a new burden on her shoulders. The task she had been given was hard, complex; she still cannot believe that the Comandante had put her in charge: it was a really important task to guide so many people. She was proud yet frightened, but firmly determined to give her life to succeed, certain that she would not make mistakes by thinking about it night and day.¹⁰

A possible explanation for her insecurity might lie in her own personality; nevertheless, a further element contributing to her sense of inadequacy comes from the difficulty of identifying herself with a typically masculine role, since men had always been the fighters and the leaders of soldiers. In Agnese the female sex experiences dramatically but proudly the passage from an old and limited dimension to a more developed position above any sex distinctions. The complexity of her character symbolises the figure of the new woman emerging during the Second World War: a somewhat contradictory mixture of ancient and innovative aspects, difficult to understand and, at times, even to accept. What is more, a

per noi. Dovevo dirglielo, adesso che staremo lontani. E dirle anche che quando saremo liberi, la zona intera dovrà saperlo. Lo dirò io chi è l'Agnese-.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp.114-15: L' Agnese diceva semore sì, sì con la testa, ma le pareva, ad ogni parola che le buttassero sulle spalle un gran peso. Era difficile, complicato, il lavoro che avrebbe dovuto fare; non arrivava a persuadersi come mai il Comandante lo desse proprio a lei, un tale carico di responsabilità, la direzione di tanta gente. Si sentiva orgogliosa e impaurita, ma decisa a metterci l'anima per riuscire, sicura che non si sarebbe sbagliata, pensandoci giorno e notte.

preponderant part of the composite attitude of women towards their new roles was played by their attachment to codified tasks, as is shown in the case of Agnese. Her being with "the boys" is mainly made up of daily actions, the sort of duties a woman--in this case a "mother"--has to perform. The whole book is full of continual mentions of the everyday actions by which Agnese takes effectively care of "her" soldiers:

Agnese went into the hut to make dinner...;¹¹

Agnese felt at ease with them; she liked her house well equipped, comfortable, almost wealthy; she could even have her old job minding the pig, the hens and doing the washing.¹²

Agnese took the plates with the soup to the table.¹³

And so on. Thanks to her behaviour as an attentive housewife, she has recreated among "the boys" the atmosphere of a real home; indeed, as we have seen, she acts as the mother and she is addressed by everyone as "mamma Agnese". It seems to me that it is the love and respect existing between her and *the children* that is the authentic link which--making of The Barracks "home"--compels them to be brave, loyal and close to each other; it is likely that the human values and sentiments Agnese has--silently and unexpectedly--managed to rekindle are a far stronger motivation to fight than any abstract ideal or any harsh rebuke by the Comandante. Moreover, it is not only because of her inner strength, but also, and especially, by displaying her maternal attitude that she has reached her "greatness" as a character, acquiring a far higher moral stature than the Comandante: a sort of female revenge in a male zone.

¹¹ Ibid., p.70: L'Agnese entrò nella capanna a preparare la cena.

¹² Ibid., p.114: L'Agnese stava bene con loro; stava bene nella casa ben fornita, comoda, quasi ricca, ritrovava i suoi valori di una volta, badava al maiale, alle galline, lavava la biancheria.

¹³ Ibid., p.142: L'Agnese mise sulla tavola i piatti della minestra.

2.4 Agnese versus other women

What has been seen by looking in counterpoint at Agnese's male companions, might be confirmed through a comparison between Agnese and the other female characters of the novel. Agnese's most impressive qualities seem to come from her female nature, no doubt about it; nevertheless, it is necessary to stress that those qualities are lacking in such characters as Rina, Maria Rosa, Minghina and her two daughters. It is as if either war has operated terrible changes in their nature--leading to the loss of their better female sides--or they conform to the much poorer archetype of the woman incapable of reacting strongly to difficult situations.

Rina--whom I have already quoted--is involved in the fight because all her relatives are partisans; therefore, her choice does not appear to be completely autonomous, since it cannot be doubted that she must have been influenced, even if indirectly, by her husband, her brothers and her father. Being young and missing her husband, who has gone to the mountains to prepare attacks on the enemy, she cannot help complaining and feeling scared: something which could never happen to Agnese, a grown-up who has already experienced the tragic sides of life. Agnese and Rina spend some time together at The Barracks; together have to care for the partisans, hide weapons and cover tracks; together have to run away from a troop of Germans. Their behaviour in those circumstances reflects not only their different personalities and ages, but also their different approach to war, as is shown in the passage quoted on p. 47. Yet the most striking feature characterising the two women lies in the relationship which develops between them during the difficult moments lived together: again, Agnese plays the role of the mother, as she does with the "boys", but she is more strict and less sympathetic with a "daughter" like Rina, easily moved to tears. It is as if Agnese were expecting from her the same kind of strength she herself possesses, the same acceptance of sacrifices aiming to help the soldiers and to save their lives. Nevertheless, Rina's personality is not endowed with the moral greatness of Agnese, perhaps because she is younger or simply because she is different. The reaction Agnese shows, when seeing her crying or upset, is that of disappointment in realising that Rina cannot be the brave woman ready to comfort and support her men at the expense of her own happiness. Strangely enough, Agnese, who is so

indulgent with the harsh Comandante and with the rest of the troop, does not display the same attitude towards Rina, who sometimes irritates her by being (rightly!) fearful:

“What are they doing ?” Rina asked trembling. They were shooting: they started to shoot against the valley, far with the machine-guns...Rina was crying quietly under the blanket: “My God, My God, Tom” and Agnese touched her with her hand saying “Shut up!” ¹⁴

It seems to me that in this “mother-daughter” relationship it is also possible to identify also another aspect, i.e. the progression from youth to maturity through all the steps characterising a woman’s life. In fact, Rina might be regarded as a “young Agnese” who has not yet seen all the devastation caused by war and who, above all, does not want to confer on anything else a greater importance than she confers on her attachment to her husband: however, this is exactly what Agnese had to do in order to accept and bear the loss of Palita.

Among the female characters of the novel, the only one close to Agnese in age is her next-door neighbour Minghina. At the beginning of the story, we learn that they had been on friendly terms when they were young; but afterwards they quarrelled about a small piece of land separating their vegetable gardens and as a result they were not on friendly terms any longer. Even from this apparently trivial episode, the wide gap separating the two women’s demeanour appears to be impossible to fill. They display a completely different attitude towards life: generous and ethically orientated in Agnese’s case, selfish and mean in the other’s. Agnese said:

“I don’t want any German in my house.” Minghina’s daughters started sniggering lightly. Minghina answered: “If they come, they have to be welcomed, there’s nothing we can do about

¹⁴ Ibid., p.100: -Che cosa fanno?-chiese la Rina, tremante. Sparavano: cominciarono a sparare contro la valle, lontano, coi fucili mitragliatori...La Rina si lamentava piano, sotto la coperta:-Dio mio, Dio mio,Tom,-e l’Agnese la toccò con una mano, le disse:-sta’zitta-.

it..." Without looking at them, Agnese said: "I'll find a way to keep them out of my house."¹⁵

This conversation is emblematic of their different positions on war logic in the Resistance. While Agnese has already committed herself to the ideal of liberty at any cost, Minghina and her family prefer to accept anything the course of the events will bring. Therefore, if the Germans are the strongest, they want to welcome them and please them, forgetting their dignity:

"You'd better stop taking food to the people hiding at the Canova" said one of the girls, and her mother pushed her to make her stop. Agnese turned back angrily: she was about to tell her something, to slap her, but then pulled herself together... They were frightened: Minghina and her daughters about themselves, Agnese about the companions. They all took their revenge by giving each other the news which was most unpleasant, reminding one another that they were in mutual control. Behind Minghina there were the fascists, behind Agnese the partisans.¹⁶

Minghina and her daughters used to cook for the Germans; the girls kept them company, without being rebuked by the mother:

The women used to do the washing and the ironing; they made pasta, cakes, and kept on speaking about the Germans enthusiastically.¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid., p.50: L'Agnese disse:- Io i tedeschi in casa non li voglio-. Le due figlie della Minghina si misero a ridere piano, di nascosto. E la Minghina osservò:-Se vengono bisogna prenderli, c'è poco da fare-... Troverò il modo che non vengano in casa mia,-disse l'Agnese, senza guardare in faccia le vicine.

¹⁶ Ibid.: -E' meglio che non portiate più da mangiare a quelli che sono nascosti alla Canova,- disse una delle ragazze, e sua madre le dette una spinta per farla tacere. L'Agnese si voltò di furia: voleva rispondere qualcosa, aveva voglia di darle uno schiaffo, ma si trattenne...Avevano paura: la Minghina e le figlie per se stesse, l'Agnese per i compagni. Se ne vendicavano dandosi a vicenda le notizie che facevano dispiacere, che rammentavano a ciascuna di essere in potere dell'altra. Dietro la Minghina c'erano i fascisti, dietro l'Agnese i partigiani.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.52: E le donne lavavano, stiravano,impastavano la sfoglia, i dolci,e parlavano continuamente dei tedeschi con entusiasmo.

Without any doubt, their choice is the easiest one, and, moreover, it was not uncommon. Forced to face violence, and completely defenceless, the two girls and their mother irrationally decided to employ their only weapons: to please them and "to comply with their wishes". Yet even this extreme loss of personal dignity could not save their lives: the Germans totally forgot about their closeness and killed them in retaliation together with dozens of other civilians. It is the defeat of their vain attempt to survive the war and also Minghina's defeat as a mother: she has driven her daughters to an easy--though morally unacceptable--choice in the hope of seeing them alive and happy. It is a kind of option Agnese could never follow, being a mother (for children she has not borne) of higher moral values and total self-sacrifice: her behaviour is not supposed to bring immediate, positive results, yet it aims at a much greater happiness--freedom--to be achieved in the future. In the mean time, she silently tries to be of help, disregarding any other possible way out and, above all, any solution like Minghina's one.

Agnese's first reaction to the news that Minghina and her family had been killed, appears to be fully unsympathetic:

They have been killed, all the four of them, and by their German "friends". There's nothing wrong in getting rid of those who spy for the enemy.¹⁸

Nevertheless, after a few moments, her true nature comes out and she felt sorry especially for the two young girls:

Thinking about the women she recollected the past, and remembered their friendship with their family...[then] Minghina had borne Marie Assunta and after a while Vandina. They were so pretty when they were children, almost the same height, they looked like twins. Vandina was the most affectionate. She loved Palita and used to come and visit him, to spend time with him...talking and making him laugh. They were good girls, and it was a shame that as they grew up their mother spoiled them.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 71: "Tutti e quattro li hanno ammazzati,-pensava,-proprio i loro amici tedeschi. Non c'è niente di male metter via dal mondo quelli che fanno la spia."

It was Minghina's fault: mean and deceitful, she taught her girls to steal eggs and pieces of wood.¹⁹

In her primitive yet clever mind, Agnese--the old and unattractive woman--is perfectly aware that the more widespread female behaviour in war has been remote from her present choice: it has either been similar to Minghina's family's one or to different yet still "weak" female archetypes. As has been seen in the case of the British women portrayed in the poetic productions previously analysed, with the Second World War the traditional figure of the woman-nurse, the woman who knits and writes letters, praying and hoping, appears endowed with far deeper--and sometimes "masculine"--qualities. This "fulfilment" of female characters by the acquisition of those features finds its most emblematic exemplification in Agnese's personality, which represents the final point of the route. The other women described in the novel might constitute the "intermediate" state: indeed, apart from the above-mentioned Rina, Minghina and her daughters, there are also two female characters that it is worth taking into account: they are all young women more or less actively involved in the Resistance for the sake of their men.

One of the girls I am referring to is not even called by name in the novel. We only know that "La Disperata" wants to marry her after the end of the war. Yet, he knows she does not share his political ideals, let alone the militancy in the partisans' party. In fact, her participation in the struggle is almost unaware: she has convinced her father to lend a boat to her boyfriend, although she fails to realise that it would be used by the band to escape from the Germans. She resembles a bit the codified literary figure of the girl ready to betray her family and her homeland for the sake of a man belonging to the opposite "faction". Without being endowed with any idealised, superior qualities, this "unnamed" girl seems to behave according to her personal feelings and desires, totally forgetting about the war. When she

¹⁹ Ibid., p.72: Ma dietro il pensiero delle donne vennero su i ricordi di tanti anni, dei suoi rapporti con la famiglia...[poi] alla Minghina era nata la Maria Assunta, e poco dopo la Vandina. Erano tanto belle da piccole, quasi uguali di statura, sembravano gemelle. La Vandina era più affettuosa: Voleva bene a Palita, veniva sempre in casa, stava con lui,...chiacchierava e lo faceva ridere. Allora erano buone bambine, peccato che poi si fossero guastate crescendo. La colpa fu della Minghina, avara, bugiarda, che insegnava alle figlie a portar via le uova, a sfilare la legna dal mucchio.

kisses her boyfriend she completely overlooks the fact that it could be the last time; she keeps on waiting for him, thinking that he is away for some "normal" job; then--very "feminine" of her--she refuses to be kissed when she realises he has got a pistol in his jacket, yet she does not even ask him why and what he is fighting. The partisan himself cannot avoid being disappointed by her lack of "political consciousness":

"Daddy says: I'd never believed that a good, quiet boy like Antonio could be a partisan. There are so many of them in the valley! But we don't want to have anything to do with them, we don't want to be killed by the Germans"...[He] lingered for a while, then said: "I'm nothing but a fool. I've never realised that you've got a father and brothers who can be good fellows only in peacetime".²⁰

In brief, in this figure we find summarised that lack of any interest in the outside reality--war in this case--which represents the negative state rejected by Agnese: the distance between this girl and the main character indeed might be reduced only if the former--freeing herself from the old codes regulating female behaviour--decided to take a courageous step into male world. This is exactly what Agnese has achieved, refusing both the passive role of the "unnamed" girl and the canny and mean "feminine" part played by her "frivolous" neighbours.

Similar behaviour is shown by the young Maria Rosa, a girl who is presented in a more detailed way than the other secondary characters of the novel:

While she [Agnese] was getting in with the bucket full, one of the girls, Maria Rosa, run after her. She said: "Good-morning, signora Agnese. May I come in? I need to talk to you". Her hair was messy; she had just got up or she hadn't slept at all. She

²⁰ Ibid., p.193:-Il babbo dice: non avrei mai creduto che un buon ragazzo quieto come Antonio facesse il partigiano; in mezzo alla valle ho saputo che ce ne sono tanti. Ma noi dei partigiani non vogliamo saperne, non vogliamo che i tedeschi ci ammazzino... "La Disperata" stette un poco a pensare, poi disse:-Io sono un grande imbecille. Non m'ero accorto che hai un babbo e dei fratelli che vanno bene in tempo di pace.

was a beautiful girl, healthy, with a pretty face and a young body, curly hair and dark eyes.²¹

The reason for this fleshed-out description becomes clear soon after in the following conversation between the two. The young woman addresses Agnese as if she were the only person able to comfort her, as it appears from her words:

“Signora Agnese”, she said. “I’d like to tell you something. I’ve been thinking about it for a long time, but I haven’t had the courage.”²²

Apart from the talks with the “boys”, this is the first time Agnese speaks with another woman; indeed, even with Rina, the dialogue is restricted to short sentences, orders or rebukes, never reaching the complexity and the length of a real conversation. It is with Maria Rosa, instead, that Agnese finds words and voice--something which does not happen very often to her; the importance conferred on this episode explains, therefore, the relative abundance of particulars characterising Maria Rosa. As the passage goes on, the talk becomes more and more a conflict of identities, the mirror of two different--but always aware--female ways of considering the war:

“I haven’t got any news from my boyfriend. He left in spring and used to send me some news at times through somebody coming here or living here. But I haven’t seen anybody since August. I know that you can tell me how to get news, that you can help me.” She lowered her voice and said softly, without looking at Agnese: “I know why you are here and what you do in the valley. My boyfriend is on the mountains. He is a partisan”...Agnese was looking at her: “You have got a boyfriend who is a partisan” she said suddenly, “you know what the partisans do, but you dance all night long with the

²¹ Ibid., p.169: Mentre rientrava col secchio pieno, le corse dietro la Maria Rosa, una delle ragazze. Disse:- Buon giorno, signora Agnese. Posso venire? Ho bisogno-. Era spettinata, si era alzata allora o non era andata a letto. Era una bella ragazza, sana, fresca nel viso, nel corpo, con i capelli ricci e gli occhi neri.

²² Ibid.: -Signora Agnese, -disse.- Le voglio dire una cosa. Da un pezzo gliela voglio dire e non mi azzardo.

Germans!" The girl was surprised, she tried to answer. "You'd better shut up", Agnese said.²³

Agnese, the symbol of the partisans' ideals, the fighter for the freedom cannot refrain from shouting at this apparently defenceless young woman, who--unlike the "unnamed" girl--is perfectly aware of the right and wrong in war. Yet, in spite of this awareness and of her supposed affection for her partisan boyfriend, she prefers the easiest way to face the dramas of war; if she can go to dance and have a nice time, forgetting about the terrible situation, it does not matter that this implies going with German boys. It is a rejection of any responsibility, the passive acceptance of a more active role according to the well-established feminine archetype, as if years and years of history have passed in vain: no difference, indeed, between this twentieth-century woman and the literary archetype of concubines and slaves always ready to change man and homeland in return for food and protection.

Although Agnese is older than Maria Rosa, compared to her she is much more emancipated: she is not scared of war and of the changes that war could cause to her life, in the sense that she does not depend on a man working to support her. Therefore, the loss of Palita has only emotional implications, and it does not mean any economic disaster for her: she can still provide for herself and work. This feature might be regarded as a sign of "modernity", oddly coexisting with traditional aspects, and contributing complexity to her personality. As has already been seen, the protective attitude she displays towards the partisans might be considered in the perspective of her "Hecuba character"; moreover, according to typical motherly behaviour, as it has been established in the course of the history of mankind, her role is not only to protect, but also to teach right and wrong. This second aspect appears in her relationship with the two girls Rina and Maria Rosa, the only two women of the story whom Agnese knows personally. It is especially with Maria Rosa--who,

²³ Ibid., p.170:-Non so più niente del mio fidanzato. Andò via in primavera, mandava notizie ogni tanto, per qualcuno che passava di qui, o che sta da queste parti. Dall'agosto non s'è più visto nessuno. Io so che lei può insegnarmi come si fa per avere notizie, aiutarmi in questa cosa,-abbassò la voce, aggiunse piano, senza guardare l'Agnese:-Io lo so perchè lei è qui e che cosa va a fare in valle. Il mio fidanzato è in montagna. E' un partigiano-...L'Agnese la guardava:-Tu hai il fidanzato nei partigiani,-disse a un tratto,-sai che cosa fanno i partigiani, e stai a ballare tutta la notte con i tedeschi?-La ragazza fece un gesto stupito, volle rispondere.-Va' là, sta' zitta che è meglio,-disse l'Agnese:

unlike Rina, is to blame for her "friendship" with the enemy--that Agnese behaves as with a daughter:

Agnese grasped her arm, pushed her back: "Do you understand what I told you? When you love one, and he goes away to fight--maybe he is dead or starving and freezing--you can't go to dance with the Germans. They are murderers, they are the ones who kill the partisans, they hang them, break their feet. If a woman loves a partisan she can't let a German bastard kiss her"... "Go to hell!" the girl said, trying to free herself from the grasp; but Agnese held her tight and shouted: "Your mother should have done this!" and slapped her twice with the other hand...²⁴

Significantly, the most difficult part of her maternal task regards her "daughters" rather than "sons". In fact, Agnese finds the behaviour of the girls reproachable and is determinedly strict with them, while she appears much more indulgent with the men. It goes without saying that the main reason for this twofold attitude lies in the different roles played by those women and those men during the Resistance. According to the historical events as presented in the novel, the men might be regarded as "real" heroes: even if some of them, at times, appear discouraged and close to tears, like children, they never lose their fundamental virile features. On the other hand, the women Agnese knows seem either to play a secondary role on the stage of the fight--Rina--or to be on the other side, entertaining the Germans without considering the significant effect of their acts on the development of the Resistance.

2.5 The necessity of fighting through a woman's eyes

At this point, the analysis of the characters has enabled me to identify by contrast the most relevant features of Agnese's personality: strong and determined as a man, she is quiet and caring as a woman or, better, as a mother. According to the Italian critic, Sebastiano

²⁴ Ibid., pp.170-1:-Hai capito che cosa ti ho detto? Quando si vuol bene a uno, e lui va via, forse è già morto, oppure soffre la fame, il freddo, e combatte, non si balla con i tedeschi. Sono degli assassini, sono loro che ammazzano i partigiani, li impiccano, gli spaccano i piedi. Se una vuol bene a un partigiano non si fa baciare da un porco tedesco...-Andate all'inferno!- disse la ragazza, e cercò di svincolarsi, dette uno strappo al braccio; ma l'Agnese la teneva forte, gridò:-Questi doveva darteli tua madre!-e con la mano libera le dette due schiaffi...

Vassalli,²⁵ Agnese is a sort of personification of the Resistance and, in a broader sense, of war itself: the whole bulk of the novel, written in a concise and extremely realistic style, finds its inner coherence in the figure of this woman. It is her strong will that animates not only her own gestures but all the characters populating the battlefield of the Resistance described in the story. Agnese acquires gigantic dimensions, and everything around her seems to be under her influence. As Vassalli points out, through Agnese's deeds, the events gain a kind of eternal validity: the drama portrayed escapes from any chronological and geographical boundary to become emblematic of all wars, ancient and contemporary. What is more, this timeless tragedy, seen through Agnese's eyes, turns into her *personal tragedy*, as if every single fact presented on the page was happening not outside, but inside herself. This explains the "subjective" point of view from which the story is told: indeed, Viganò has built a typical twentieth-century novel, where the narrator disappears to be replaced by the inner reality and the personal perspective of the protagonist. As a result (although this is not visible from a first glance but needs a more careful examination), every line of the book is written from within Agnese's consciousness and reflects her own feelings and thoughts. Therefore, the calm Agnese might represent a medium between history and reader: the selection of reality providing the substance of the text appears to have been made by this character more than by the writer. As a result, despite her "difficult" relationship with words, it is Agnese who is the effective story-teller and the narration of the events mirrors her personal vision of them. Consequently, we might conclude that the war portrayed here is Agnese's vision of it and that an attentive reader detects behind every single line the flux of her thoughts.

In the third section of the book, there are more than fifteen pages where the name of Agnese does not appear at all. Significantly, those pages deal with an action of the partisans aiming to establish contact with some comrades placed in another refuge. Agnese appears at the beginning of the episode as the mother saying goodbye to the children and at the end as the mother happily--although shyly--welcoming them back. Her relevance here depends on her being the starting point and the end of the partisans' route: this suggests the image of "the

²⁵ See *ibid.*, *Introduction*, pp. V-X.

mother of the soldier" who represents the privileged listener to the account of the children's actions. Indeed, the whole story happening in between is first told to her by the protagonists and then by her to the reader. What we see on the page is, then, the transcription of Agnese's thought, the representation of her attitude towards the war. The long absence of female characters in the above pages exemplifies Agnese's vision of a "male war". In spite of her awareness that struggles and fights (especially in such a peculiar case as the Resistance) involve everyone without any distinction, there is still the separation of roles between male and female tasks. Under Agnese's eyes, the partisans are totally positive characters, even when they are not as "good" as one might expect (see the Comandante); moreover, they are the ones who possess the keys of truth, the instruments to decode reality and discover what is right. Agnese herself would not have participated in the Resistance if it had not been for her husband Palita, who was involved in some political "affair". At the outset of the book, we see Palita speaking with two companions while Agnese is knitting near the fireplace, completely uninterested in the men's conversation. Only after Palita's death will she understand the significance of that talk, which was to discuss some partisans' plan. From this moment, Agnese develops her growing involvement in the Resistance; her political awareness finds its best expression in the very last pages, when she, captured by the Germans, is in a dark room with other prisoners:

Agnese left the corner... elbowed her way through the crowd and reached the group; she wanted to listen to them. A woman said: "Of course they [the Germans] are not cruel. If it were not for the criminals provoking them, they would be good and kind to us"...Agnese was standing next to her, staring, and turned while the woman was saying: "We shouldn't forget that we betrayed them..."; then she stopped because of the intense gaze of Agnese on her face. Agnese said: "Please go ahead. I just wanted to look at your face." Yet the woman was not able to carry on, and gave a look around shyly. The old man who had spoken before...asked arrogantly: "Who are you?" Agnese answered: "I was just passing by, and the Germans took me to keep me here for their criminal plans. They're bastards and

you're even worse than them if you say that they're good and kind."²⁶

For the first time in the book, and paradoxically, just before dying, Agnese expresses openly her views on the enemy. Although we should not underestimate the peculiarity of the war described here (the Resistance has been a particular tragic side of war experienced only by some Italians and French), Agnese's opinions seem to maintain a deeper meaning which goes well beyond the circumstances she is living in. Her strong reaction to the woman's statement in the above passage symbolises her vision of the conflict: war is a bad thing, and--as we have seen--she would like it to stop and "the boys" to be finally saved; nevertheless, sometimes it has to be fought with determination and courage because of those supreme ideals which make life worth living. Since not everybody is able to distinguish between good and evil, there must be a way to make these distinctions effective; the last resort is fighting:

"The rebels die for the fools...but those of them who survive will take their revenge on the fools too. As soon as spring comes, the rebels will settle their account with them. There won't be any way out for Germans and fascists..."²⁷

Agnese's position towards war corresponds to the multifarious personality already outlined: it is remote from the general, undistinguished pacifism which is often associated with a female personality; yet it is also very far from the pride shown by the epic "mother of heroes", as well as from the passive acceptance of a common destiny of suffering decided by men. It seems to me that Agnese is the symbol of a mature and intelligent response to war, probably the best and most appropriate reaction women have ever had. Although this might

²⁶ Ibid., p.235-6: L'Agnese si mosse dal suo angolo...passò di traverso fra la gente, s'avvicinò al gruppo in ascolto. Una donna disse:-Certo che non sono cattivi. Se non ci fossero dei delinquenti che li tormentano, loro con noi sarebbero buoni e cortesi...L'Agnese le stava proprio a fianco, la fissava. Lei si volse mentre diceva:-Non bisogna dimenticare che noi li abbiamo traditi...-si trovò sul viso il peso vivo di quegli occhi, s'interruppe.-Niente,-disse l'Agnese.-Dica pure. Volevo solo vederla in faccia-. Ma la donna non infilava più il resto del discorso, guardò in giro irrisolta. Il vecchio che parlava prima si fece avanti, domandò, arrogante:-Voi chi siete?-Io sono una che passava, e i tedeschi mi hanno preso e portato qui per la loro sporche faccende,-rispose l'Agnese.-Porci, e voi più di loro, a dire che sono buoni e gentili-.

²⁷ Ibid., p.237:-I ribelli muoiono per gli imbecilli...ma quelli che restano, anche con gli imbecilli faranno i conti. Siamo vicini alla paga, appena verrà la buona stagione. Ai tedeschi e ai fascisti non gli rimane più niente...

appear rather unusual in a middle-aged and uneducated woman, Agnese has developed her own opinions about the conflict she is experiencing and has found a way to put her ideals into reality. She has chosen to play the most courageous part: sacrifice and abnegation, contempt for the danger, or risks of any sort, pertain to her apparently secondary role. Giving the "boys" moral and material support, she does not realise how important she is for them, because to her war is physical fighting and clever plans, not cooking or doing the washing. Nevertheless, her apparently humble acts are as effective as those of the soldiers, and sometimes even more so (see the Comandante's comments about her bravery and ability in the passage quoted on page 51 above). By performing both all necessary, humble tasks and real war "actions" (for instance the delivery of important messages and weapons from one barracks to another), Agnese seems to have achieved the perfection of a machine, a sort of potential "dehumanisation" that, however, never happens. Indeed, her strength and firm belief in the cause of the Resistance are accompanied by a depth of emotion and sentiment which confers on her a profoundly human quality. During the day Agnese is the restless worker, the well-organised leader, the caring though apparently distant mother; but when the light fades away and no-one can see her, she is tired and scared, concerned about everybody's life. This sentimental aspect of her personality is visible especially in her recollection of the past and of Palita, whom she invokes every night, hoping to see him in her dreams. In fact, it is the thought of Palita that still illuminates her life and gives her endurance and courage, which Agnese quietly accepts as gifts from him. Palita is the one she addresses before falling asleep; he is her source of energy and of faith:

She did not want to sleep, because she felt the weight of something very heavy on her chest... Yet she fell into a light sleep, a sort of shadowland where she forgot to be suffering. In that shadowland Palita came, Palita who had not been there for a long time. He sat at her side on the bed and touched her arm: "It is hard, isn't it? I know you can't bear it any longer. But it's not time to be free yet, Agnese. There is still a long way. I must go now..." He faded away without ending the sentence. He

looked absent-minded, worried. Agnese saw him opening the door...²⁸

Palita's apparitions are frequent in the text, since every night Agnese prays to see him in her dreams and to ask him what to do. This is probably the only "weakness" she allows herself, and none could ever suspect the tender side hidden behind her strength and courage. On the other hand, it is her continuous recollecting of Palita and her attachment to memories that confer on Agnese the quality of a female archetype which, far from being the stereotyped female character of the heroine "in tears", still represents the most human feature of her personality. Indeed, it is the coexistence of these different aspects in one single person--the mother, the wife, the fighter--that renders Agnese the "titanic" figure as in Vassalli's definition. In brief, Agnese is both the symbol of the Italian Resistance and the personification of women's heroic qualities, which--though less conspicuous and less celebrated than men's--might be regarded as even more striking. Yet, neither "moral greatness" nor women's or men's sacrifice is able to stop the inconceivable cruelty mankind has displayed since immemorial times, in peace as in war. So it happens that the pulsing life animating years and years of an individual existence through trivial gestures and great deeds suddenly fades away because of a few shots from a machine-gun, as Agnese's death tragically demonstrates:

The marshal shouted again; he took a pistol and shot close at her eyes her mouth and forehead, one, two, four shots. She collapsed on the ground with her face smashed. Everyone ran away screaming. The marshal put the pistol back and shivered, certainly out of rage. Then the lieutenant said something in

²⁸ Ibid., p. 147: Ma non voleva dormire perchè le pareva che qualche cosa le pesasse sul petto...Invece si addormentò, un velo appena di sonno, un'ombra che cancellò debolmente la coscienza di soffrire. in quel velo venne Palita, assente da tanto tempo. Si sedette sull'orlo della branda e le toccò un braccio: - Com'è dura, vero? Lo so che non ne puoi più. Ma non è ancora l'ora di liberarsi, agnese. E? lontana, l'ora. Io vado...- Andò via senza finire la frase. Pareva distratto, accorato. L'Agnese lo vide aprire la porta...

German to him and smiled. Agnese was left alone, a curious little thing, a pile of dark robes in the snow.²⁹

²⁹ Ibid., p.239: Il maresciallo gridò ancora; prese la pistola, le sparò da vicino negli occhi, sulla bocca, sulla fronte, uno, due, quattro colpi. Lei piombò in giù col viso fracassato contro la terra. Tutti scapparono urlando. Il maresciallo rimise la pistola nella fondina, e tremava, certo di rabbia. Allora il tenente gli disse qualche cosa in tedesco, e sorrise. L'Agnese restò sola, stranamente piccola, un mucchio di stracci neri sulla neve.

CHAPTER III

MASS-OBSERVATION AND PANE NERO: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S WAR DIARIES AND MEMORIES IN BRITAIN AND ITALY

My horror of all this war business is qualified by an eagerness to be a unit of it. I feel as if I have been waiting for this all my life and I have just realised it.¹

These words in the diary of a young woman from London have been considered by Dorothy Sheridan as emblematic of the complex attitude shown by the female protagonists of the Second World War. *Protagonists* is the key-word here, since--as has already been noticed--women certainly played an active role in the theatre of war. To be precise, *theatre* is too restricted a word to express the total involvement caused by the tremendous display of armies and violence all over the earth during the years 1939-1945. In the face of such a terrifying catastrophe, of which the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was perhaps the highest point, women claimed their right to participate, not only to wait and watch. The previous chapters have already treated the theme of women and literature (poetry in Britain) and women as warriors (the battlefields of the Resistance in Italy); yet, in both cases, the militancy of women has represented a phenomenon strictly connected with the specific cultural and historical environments to which they belonged. So it has happened that Britain had her female poets, since a well-rooted tradition of women *intelligentsia* already existed in the country of the Bröntes, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot, Virginia Woolf and so on. On the other hand, the same was not bound to happen in Italy, where a conservative society had prevented women's integration in the field of literary production, confining them

¹ Dorothy Sheridan (ed.), *Wartime Women: An Anthology of Women's Wartime Writing for Mass-Observation 1937-45* (London: Mandarin, 1990), p.1.

to the fixed roles established by a male chauvinist mentality. Similarly, the fighting of the Italian Resistance had some heroic, albeit unknown, women "warriors", whose symbol might be found in Agnese, while little or nothing of this kind could be traced in Great Britain. At this point, it is worth examining the testimonies left by "ordinary" women in their daily experience of war, to add to the particular examples taken into account in the first two chapters. Significantly, it is daily life and the new needs produced by war that offer the scope for the closest links between the British and the Italian female attitudes towards the conflict: perhaps neither cultural nor contingent differences can exist when primitive necessities and sentiments are involved.

By reading diaries and reports by women who lived through war and its consequences on the sidelines of the battlefields, one reaches an unexpected awareness of the striking similarities in attitude and reaction to the conflict by women living in completely different countries. Indeed, if we look at this sort of written production--considering it a reasonably truthful witness of war experience--²all discrepancies between distant cultures seem to disappear. As Dorothy Sheridan has underlined in her introduction, the feeling expressed in the statement quoted at the head of this chapter conveys the dichotomic attitude revealed by the female protagonists of war. Although in most cases they believed in pacifism, women could not prevent themselves from participating and, above all, from realising the advantageous, even emancipatory aspect of their involvement. Staying at home and supporting by "war jobs" their men away in the battlefields, for the first time they fully comprehended their strength and the importance they could have in acting for the benefit of society. According to Miriam Mafai, on the "Italian stage" it happened very much the same:

Famine and war force women outside their homes, compelling them to look for jobs, make decisions, help those who were fighting or fighting themselves. Women had to abandon the roles of "perfect wives and mothers" given to them by Fascism

² It is none of my intention to discuss here the complex question of fiction and reality in written works (either works meant as literature or simply records and diaries), considering that in the case of M-O diaries it can be extremely difficult to estimate the sincerity and truthfulness of the writers' records; on the other hand Vigano's work is a novel--which, however reality-based, still retains some fictitious features.

and the Church. Far from feeling aware of their new parts, they sometimes considered the change as the only means to preserve their traditional identities. Nevertheless, the transgression they had experienced marked their consciousness, unveiling the existence and the possibility of unknown, individual routes, more difficult and, at the same time, more appealing than those traditionally reserved for women. Necessity became, or could become, a choice, an aware undertaking of responsibilities, the opening of a new horizon, a different way of being individuals and women.³

It is clear that, by developing the above statements through a careful examination of the writings contained in both works, several themes will appear in common, since the perspective acquired by the two critics in the light of their studies is practically the same. Nevertheless, there might be some differences, which, far from invalidating the comparison, will, rather, prove the existence of a shared women's consciousness that goes beyond geographical and cultural limits. It is worth underlining that the topic of this chapter pertains neither to the higher spheres of literature nor to upper-class experiences. In fact, the movement of ideas and social changes can very rarely influence the development of human society if they are restricted to such limited areas; significantly, the reports taken into account by the above critics mainly refer to working class women, provided with little or no education at all. Moreover, in the majority of cases, on both the Italian and the English side, the stories told can safely be regarded as reliable and truthful, filtered by no propaganda or commercial aims, but simply seen through the eyes and minds of women (although the testimonies collected by Mafai sometimes are recollections and memories rather than reports).

³ Miriam Mafai, *Pane nero. Donne e vita quotidiana nella Seconda guerra mondiale* (Milano: Mondadori, 1987), pp.4-5: La fame e la guerra spingono dunque le donne fuori di casa, le obbligano a cercare un lavoro, a prendere decisioni, ad aiutare coloro che sparano o a sparare loro stesse ; le obbligano ad uscire dal ruolo che era stato loro affidato dal fascismo e dalla Chiesa, di "moglie e madre esemplare". Questa uscita dal ruolo non avviene sempre coscientemente. In molti casi , al contrario, si giustifica proprio col desiderio di mantenere fede fino in fondo ad una tradizionale immagine di sè. Ma, una volta vissuta, la trasgressione incide nella coscienza di tutte, rivelando l'esistenza e la possibilità di percorsi individuali e sconosciuti, certo più accidentati ma anche più gratificanti di quelli che alle donne erano riservate in passato. La necessità diviene o può divenire allora una scelta, una cosciente assunzione di nuove responsabilità, l'apertura di un orizzonte nuovo, di un modo diverso di essere donna e persona.

3.1 Mass-Observation: war and British women

According to the information provided by Sheridan,⁴ her anthology of Wartime women's reports found its material in the diaries collected for a society called Mass-Observation. In 1937, a group of male intellectuals decided to gather "the views of ordinary people and ... endeavoured to tap a deeper level of human consciousness in British social character".⁵ Moreover, the other striking feature of this enterprise was that the female perspective was to be the privileged point of observation. Indeed, the main aim of Mass-Observation was to cast a light on traditionally neglected strata of society: significantly, the appropriate basis for this sort of enquiry was represented by women belonging to the low or sometimes the middle classes. In this way, the collected material was meant as a parallel development of the social analysis normally carried on by the press, which used to ignore most of the lives of the common people.

As Sheridan emphasises, at the beginning the approach of Mass-Observation was to "observe: to watch and to record people's behaviour and conversations",⁶ thanks to interviews and surveys conducted by a team of investigators who were imbued with anthropology, American-influenced sociology and psychoanalysis. They collected material from several places, both cities--for instance, London and Liverpool--and small towns--among which Bolton, in Lancashire, that offered witnesses especially about the years between 1937 and 1939. The records from Bolton dating back to this period can be regarded as particularly relevant, since reflects the prelude of women's sentimental involvement in war. Yet, although apparently there is not really much the present-day researcher can find of "war thought" in it, the awareness--shown by some of them--of the dramatic consequences of the conflict originated some months before the outbreak of the war. Hence, these first reports,

⁴ p.4.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

already imbued with an instinctive patriotism or generic pacifism, offer an interesting portrait of women's lives in the British working class of the period: their routine, their menial tasks--in short, the way by which they were attempting to preserve the security of daily life in the limited circle of their own families. For this reason, the collected diaries and reported conversations referring to these two years seem to me to offer some interesting topics for critical reflection, even if they do not provide the elements for a fully-founded comparison with the Italian field during the same years. (The work by Mafai--which will constitute the other part of the chapter--does not deal with the pre-war years, and information about Italian women with reference to that period appears to be very hard to come by.) Nevertheless, it is worth briefly examining some extracts from Mass-Observation diaries referring to the Munich Crisis, since in them will be found hints of the general British female attitude towards war before the "lived" experience of it.

3.2 1938-39: the prelude to the conflict through different female perspectives

From 1939, Mass-Observation both enlarged the area taken into account and adopted new methods of enquiring, such as written records in addition to conversations and interviews. Diary-writing had not been a habit for these women, at least not for the majority of them, since probably their education and their jobs were not particularly linked with any form of "literature". Nevertheless, they all seemed enthusiastic about the chance offered to them: in fact, by writing they started to reflect on things, and this led them to a more critical understanding of the conflict. Sometimes--as will be seen--they developed an increasing awareness of the new roles they were playing by working outside the home and doing voluntary or paid war jobs. In other cases, women who continued their domestic lives--though more and more onerous--found in their reports a different way to approach reality: instead of accepting, as had always been the case, the established ideas and ideals handed down by a male-orientated mentality, they started to develop their personal opinions. Undoubtedly, writing became for them the means by which they could both offer their

contribution to society (participation does not simply imply carrying out precise tasks and jobs) and assert their existence as active members.

Sunday 3 September

My sister Doreen woke us with a cup of tea this morning saying that they had just asked everybody to stand by for an announcement at 10 a.m. We discussed what would be said and Doreen said, "If Hitler comes I shall kill myself, I wouldn't live under him." Me: "Oh, he won't invade England, He would just take all that makes England. It would not be the England we know if he beats us." My mother: " Oh, he won't beat us, he might cripple us for life, but he won't beat us." Me: " No, I don't think he will."⁷

This passage belongs to the diary of Muriel Green, one of the representative witnesses who wrote for Mass-Observation. An eighteen-year old girl from Norfolk, working as garage assistant in the family business, Muriel provided a regular report of her war experience. As appears from the above passage, her diary reflects the everyday aspects of common attitudes towards the conflict: what is striking is the coexistence of routine gestures (have tea for breakfast) and strange new rituals (everybody has to stand by for an announcement at 10 a.m.). The traditional picture of the family at the breakfast table represents the perpetuation of well-rooted habits, which they desperately tried to preserve in spite of the outburst of violence and paralysing fear connected to war. What is more, the apparent quietness and complete peacefulness dominating this domestic picture creates a strong contrast with the statements uttered by the young Doreen: "If Hitler comes I shall kill myself." This reaction displays the existence of a political consciousness even in the "less representative" members of the public, that is in a young woman who would probably be credited by no-one with depth of thought. Moreover, the resolution to commit suicide confers on her a halo which maybe raises Doreen--a representative of the average lower-middle-class woman--to a heroic level. The tragic gesture she promises to commit expresses her hatred towards Nazi-fascism and her fear of horrendous war crimes. Almost as significant as Doreen's statement is her mother's

⁷ Ibid., p.49.

claim of English moral strength: England would never be beaten by the Germans, preserving till the end her own dignity and courage.

It seems to me that the above passage exemplifies at her best the new female figure emerging during the turmoil of the Second World War: as fierce and brave as any great colonial empire could ask of her children, these women seem to follow the archetype of the "mothers, wives, daughters" who are not inferior in moral strength to the heroes to whom they are related. In this context, it is no surprise that British women were able to collaborate to ensure a positive outcome of the conflict, as will be seen through the reconstruction of their lives in the reports for Mass-Observation. In spite of the shyness some of them manifested, especially at the beginning of the War, they gave in the years 1939-45 a clear proof of moral grandeur. Mrs Arnold from Ilford, Essex, is an exemplar of the old female vision about the male quality of war:

28th September 1938

It is difficult to get any definite or any coherent answer from the class of people I get in touch with. *I am just one of a group fitting in a word here and there.* All are very excited, seem to think war might break out any minute. *The men look very serious but I am only a little old woman, have no commanding presence and never try to approach them.*⁸

In fact, she was eighty when she wrote this page of her diary, which therefore reflects the starting point of that evolution ending with the bravery of the young Doreen. In 1938 (the date of the report) England was concerned--as well as the rest of Western world--about the Munich Crisis and the consequences that would follow; Mrs Arnold represents the less critical part of English society, the one that could watch the possible conflict only through the deformed perspective coming from past experience. Indeed, we can suppose that she could not suspect how catastrophic the war was bound to be; the first person she spoke to about it--someone she presumably regarded as a sort of "expert" about military matters--was her

⁸ Ibid., pp.33-4 (My emphases).

landlord, a veteran of the Great War, who to our eyes was probably not at all as imbued with "political understanding" as she thought. On the other hand, the kind of "aware" woman already identified in Doreen reacted to the same news about the Munich Crisis in a more "independent" way, expressing her own opinions without asking the "wiser" intelligence of men:

I avoid discussing the situation for this heightens my distress, and as far as possible leave the room when I think someone is going to speak of it...The crisis has made me grave, and yet there are those whom it has not yet touched...the following dialogue on Thursday, 22nd, inst., speaks for itself. A pot of tea is made each morning and we go through the cloakroom in relays for a cup. I: Do you think I could "steal" a little more tea? B.C. and M.C. : Why? I: The political situation upset me so much yesterday that I could not eat or drink, and I feel thirsty now.-Had I announced the end of the world I could not have caused greater surprise.-B.C.(with incredulity): *You don't say Hitler annoys you?* (sic)-on my side I was bereft of speech.-M.C.: *It will be time enough to think of politics when the air raids start.* B.C. : You're like my mother. *She's actually taken to reading the newspapers. Stupid I call it.*⁹

So Miss French, aged thirty-six, from Glasgow expressed indignation at the careless attitude shown by her female colleagues about war, which they probably considered an event beyond their capacity for understanding and to be consigned to men's superior wisdom. Unlike them, Miss French cannot help feeling a deep concern about the crisis, but she also has an extremely aware and sensible approach. She has developed her own judgement, achieving a sort of "independence of thought" which accounts for the further route of female emancipation visible throughout the war and during its aftermath. Certainly, the history of modern women could not have started from the supine acceptance of all events, regardless of the destiny of mankind, shown by Miss French's colleagues, who are apparently interested only in their mid-morning tea and the preservation of trivial habits menaced by the crude reality reported by the newspapers.

⁹ Ibid., pp.29-32. (My emphases).

The gap separating the old Mrs. Arnold and the younger woman from Glasgow is nevertheless filled by their common desire to be useful. While Miss French shows her concern through her intellectual "readiness", which renders her equal to men and results in an implicit request for participation, Mrs Arnold shows a much more typical, maternal attitude which reminds one of the Hecuba archetype:

30th September

...I have spoken to some mothers who are glad that the children can go with the schools but don't seem to care what happens to themselves. I feel something like that but if I had children I should wonder what would happen to them if I were killed. Have offered myself for ARP and have been accepted. I know I can be of *some* use.¹⁰

A similar desire to be useful was not shared at all by certain other women: apart from the above examples of indifference given by Miss French's report, Mass-Observation provides further proofs of female underrating of war necessities, which they looked on as intrusions in the well-planned routine of their clean and cosy houses. A "Mrs Hamilton, housewife aged forty living with her husband and young daughter (Margery) in Marlow, Buckinghamshire" represents a female response to war as to a distant, alien reality concerning some unknown people that, out of the blue, might interfere with your own "family business":

Sept.27. From notes

...Going down the road to catch a bus to Wycombe I meet a neighbour. She is a carpenter's wife but you wouldn't think so to look at her. They live in an ornate detached house in this road. I ask if she is taking some children. She says, "I wouldn't be bothered with children." I say, "We may be compelled to take them," and she replies she has told the man her house will be full of her own people and adds that she has nobody coming really. I tell her I can't stop as I have a bus to catch, and I can't help thinking how selfish some people are.¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 34. (Her emphases).

¹¹ Ibid., p.44.

The children referred to are London schoolchildren evacuated to the countryside by the authorities in the event of air attacks (the year is 1938). Mrs Hamilton appears negatively impressed by her neighbour's refusal to be helpful, a refusal which, unfortunately, represented a common reaction; in fact, even her next-door neighbour selfishly behaves like the carpenter's wife:

She says, "He [the man who is calling at the houses about the refugees] called a little while ago and I would not open the door to him. We don't want any children. They are a tie, and require a lot of looking after. Although if we don't have children we might have adults dumped on us. Which would be worse for you have got some sort of control over children."¹²

Nevertheless, even the critical Mrs Hamilton expresses her own reserves about lodging evacuees and she cannot prevent herself from telling the man in charge that she "can't have young children" because her husband "comes home from work sometimes at 1 a.m. and has to sleep during the morning." At the end of her report, she implicitly admits belonging to the same group of "selfish" people, although she does not employ this adjective in referring to herself:

I have spoken to four people representing 4 different households and the impression I have is one of mild resentment at having thrown open their houses to strangers. Then there are my own reactions. At first I felt I would take in refugees but did not want them. Analysing this I came to the conclusion that I would welcome them if they were *of my own choosing*. I mean if I could pick them out of a crowd.¹³

The same situation was faced by the abovementioned Green sisters when "war came to a Norfolk village", in 1939. In fact, unlike in Italy--where the Fascist boast of invincible power prevented the citizens from anticipating the problems connected to the conflict and planning an adequate response--Britain promoted a campaign of evacuation before war was

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., p.45.(Her emphases).

actually declared. So it happened that the official planning feared by Mrs Hamilton in 1938 was put into effect from September 1939, as witnessed by the Greens. "Children do not arrive" is the laconic statement dating back to September 1st by Muriel, who neither comments nor criticises the scheme, since--we might suppose--she was animated by a different spirit and could not feel war and its dangers as distant any longer. In this regard, she noticed with disappointment that

The village people objected to the evacuees chiefly because of dirtiness of their habits and clothes. Also because of their reputed drinking and bad language. It is exceptional to hear women swear in this village or for them to enter a public house. The villagers used to watch them come out of the pubs with horror...¹⁴

It seems to me that Muriel's reaction manifests her open mind together with her awareness of village people's closed mentality: indeed, as is shown by the employment of dots in the last line, she objects to the "horror" visible in the villagers in the face of such extravagant behaviour. Significantly, the main reason for criticism is represented by the women evacuees, who--coming from large cities and presumably belonging to the lowest social strata--manifest a disrespectful ignorance of the accepted "civilised" codes. It is worth stressing that the question of changed female behaviour in wartime was one of the most debated topics among contemporary observers, and indeed it deserves a more careful examination, which will be carried out later in the chapter. What emerges from the above passage and from other pages of Muriel's reports is the bewildered reaction country and townspeople showed towards the radically different social rules of each. The diary written by this young woman in 1939 mirrors one of the first relevant modifications war brought about in the established structure of society, i.e. the sudden encounter between city and village, between a more free and sometimes careless attitude to conventions and a deeply rooted respect for tradition. The transformation of basic values, in a nation still subject to the invisible and yet strong interweaving of modernity and ancient social rules codified during the

¹⁴ p.58.

Victorian age, left the onlookers full of puzzled surprise. It was the war that caused all this, together with more trivial changes that altered the quiescent following of accepted habits. As can be learnt from Muriel's diary and in many other reports, life was made difficult as early as the first year of the conflict by the crumbling of every kind of certainty on which daily life was built: for instance, the impossibility for people from the cities to find ready-cooked food, to have hairdressers, bus stations etc. in the country:

Other women said that they found such difficulty in the country shops. Food was much dearer at the village grocer's. Nothing can be bought ready cooked and they did not understand the coal cooking ranges of the country. They all grumbled at the inconvenience of travel, now only one bus each way every two hours, and about three train a day. They were not used to living three miles from a station and a bus stop. Some said there was no cinema and one wanted to know where she could get her hair permed...they found the country very quiet and lacked amusement.¹⁵

3.3 Female behaviour during the war

Through the eyes of the "city women" described by Muriel it is possible to detect the other side of that quiet, submissive housewife exemplified by Mrs Hamilton or by the elderly Mrs Arnold. "I'd rather be bombed on my own door step than stay here and die of depression." Instead of confining themselves to the archetyped role of "the angel in the house", the evacuees propose a way of life traditionally associated with men: therefore, it does not appear strange that they should attract the implicit disapproval of Muriel, who, despite her young age and open-mindedness, cannot refrain from recording the episode. Some years after, the changes in women's roles were so evident that they had acquired the status of a matter of concern frequently debated. One proof of this is to be found in a report produced

¹⁵ Ibid., p.58.

by Mass-Observation in 1943 about this issue, which was rightly considered one of the most relevant consequences of wartime chaos:

This war, like the last, has made fundamental changes in the social habits and position of women in this country. We intend...to discuss various aspects of these changes. In particular, we shall consider shortly people's feelings about the place women should take in post-war Britain, comparing men's attitudes and those of the women themselves, and indicating some of the tension arising from wartime acceleration in equality of status between the sexes.¹⁶

The first field where the changes provoked a real wave of disappointment was that of leisure, since--as will be seen--the complex question about women and work was to prove less open to objection. The statement reported by Muriel casts a light on the unusual--for that time--relationship between female identity and the needs of entertainment and social life, normally identified with going to pubs. As Sheridan points out, "the increasing number of women enjoying a drink in a public house were seen by M-O as an important indication of how far women's role had been changed by wartime".¹⁷ What is worth emphasising here is not the male attitude towards this new, almost "emancipated" female figure, but rather the shocked or happy response manifested by women themselves. The new trend in social customs corresponded to the modifications in the area of work caused by wartime necessities: if women could--and had to--work like men, facing the same kind of responsibilities and, very often, having the same jobs, they had to be entitled to the same sort of entertainment. In fact, from a superficial look at the testimonies collected by Mass-Observation on the topic, it appears that the above statement was not questioned at all by contemporary observers, both male and female:

...Quite a lot of them [women] drink spirits but if I'm short, I serve men in preference. Too much isn't good for these

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 195.

¹⁷ Ibid.

youngsters. They usually behave quite well too. I have nothing against it.¹⁸

This is the opinion of a male publican, who, nevertheless, seems to have a counterpart in a female colleague:

...The war has made a great deal of difference; I don't mind girls drinking in the bar alone or otherwise. Usually when they come in alone, they don't go out alone, but who am I to criticise--my job is to sell the liquor and be pleasant to customers, not to be nosy about their comings and goings.¹⁹

Apparently, both statements as well as some more contained in the Mass-Observation survey, reflect a "forced" acceptance of this new female behaviour, which, significantly, is explained as a result of war "disorder" and cannot therefore be rejected until the end of the conflict. Hence, women are regarded as clever characters, able to take advantage from the subversive force represented by war. Needless to say, this situation was considered temporary and strictly dependent on the circumstances: at least this was the common opinion women themselves expressed. It was only a restricted minority of intellectuals--all males--that realised the deep implications of this initial change: the small ways in which modifications occurred were indeed visible only to a critical understanding. The entrance of women into the life of public houses indicated the raising of women's expectations of what might be possible, underlining the fact that war became for them the start of independent thinking:

The subject of what shall happen to women after the war is becoming a very live issue today. Mrs Corbett Ashby, addressing a recent conference of the National Council of women, told her audience: "There is an enormous force of public opinion which is already marshalling its forces to push women back to where they were before the war."²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid., p.197.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.196.

²⁰ Ibid., p.195.

3.4 Women and work

The government's measures to meet wartime needs adequately were obviously dependent on the evolving situation both at home and abroad. As has already been mentioned, the first plan to be put into effect dates back to 1938, under the pressure of increasing panic especially about bomb attacks. In fact, by the time war was actually declared in September 1939, people had already started to have nightmares that had the terror of aerial bombardment as the most frequent feature. Reactions to the news about the attacks on Spanish cities in the Spanish Civil War had shown a strong preoccupation with security in the cities, which were bound to become the favourite targets of Hitler's plans. Politicians felt compelled to act pragmatically: as Sheridan states, "the first official circular on air raid precautions was issued to local authorities by the government in 1935",²¹ to be followed by Air Raid Warden Service in 1937. These measures were accompanied by a strong appeal to people's sensitiveness, and, as was to be expected, the immediate response (even if not always positive) was by women. The precautions against bombardments included the employment of anti-gas masks and, above all, the evacuation schemes mainly involving women from the countryside and villages who had to welcome the refugees from the cities: significantly, even these were in large part women with children. The further steps in the following years were in response to more impelling necessities: first of all, every kind of production to fulfil military strategies (munitions, weapons and so on); secondly, material support for men in the battlefield (clothes, food, etc.); thirdly, the exploitation of traditional female war jobs such as nursing and childcare, together with the innovative measure of recruiting women into the army. Even if they were both voluntary and paid, these jobs resulted in a completely different approach to war by women, who for the first time were strongly requested to play an untraditionally "active" part in society. Although in the long trend this attribution of new responsibilities to women was radically to change the structure

²¹ Ibid., p. 27.

and the codes of Britain (as of the other Western countries), the most immediate implications regarded simply a woman's attitude towards war: a terrifying reality able to destroy well-established habits and traditions, war acquired some "positive connotations" by becoming the unsuspected means of female integration in society.

a. Wartime women in towns and countryside

1 October 1941

The ordeal is over--my soldier has arrived. Very mild and inoffensive--very thin and delicate looking. I suspect a tendency to asthma...Had no time to think about the war today, but I did notice that there was a report that the Rumanians were 'ratting'--as though the Germans would let them!! If the Rumanians retire successfully, we shall have the Finns, the Hungarians, and the Italians doing the same.

10.05 p.m.-and I believe that is the sound of AA gunfire. Must see to my water buckets, and warm clothes for the family. They won't.²²

This passage belongs to the report written for Mass-Observation by a Mrs Trowbridge, who represents the average British woman involved in voluntary war work. From her words it is easy to detect the interweaving of routine daily life and exceptional circumstances created by war. Living in Bradford, Mrs Trowbridge is aware of being luckier than women in some other cities, and manifests this awareness with her responsible acceptance of the sacrifices imposed by wartime. In fact, the soldier she speaks about as a normal guest ("Wonder if a smoky room suits him...I'm so thankful my son was at home to receive my visitor")²³ might have been regarded--and we know other women did feel this way--as an obtrusive presence in her domestic "happiness". At the same time, she cannot help noticing the signs of an abnormal situation, such as gunfire, which nevertheless are treated as routine. The concise and apparently unemotional style of Mrs Trowbridge's report underplays

²² Ibid., p.144.

²³ Ibid.

all the difficulties of wartime and reveals her moral strength, which makes of her the type of the brave, though humble, "woman in war". By participating in several voluntary activities, she seems to have found the perfect balance between her old reality of middle-class housewife and the changes provoked by war.

The food situation is just as I prophesied. The grocer in Heaton refused to give extra rations to some of the women who are entertaining soldiers. He says he has had no intimation from the Food Office of any extra arrivals in Heaton, therefore he can't be expected to have any supplies for them. But what is the poor housewife to do? My soldier seemed surprised when I remarked that the fruit and tomatoes situation was serious in Bradford. They are going begging in Southport.²⁴

The "food crisis" does not appear to worry her more than would be reasonable; obviously, it depends also on the fact that it is not bread that is lacking, but more "superfluous" food. Nevertheless, Mrs Trowbridge is not upset and seems to be capable of keeping the situation under control. Danger, famine, a stranger in her house are all elements connoting the war she is experiencing, all of them menacing her established lifestyle; yet, in spite of her deep understanding of reality, she does not make a noise about the conflict. Her reaction is mature and well-balanced, since in her eyes war is something appreciable but not debatable, at least at the moment: her thought seems to be pragmatical and therefore productive of appropriate gestures. It cannot be denied that Mrs Trowbridge and the class of average women she represents are perfectly aware that "war is a bad thing"; moreover, considering her personal involvement, she cannot refrain from complaining--however calmly--about the large amount of work she has to perform. As a housewife, she continues taking care of the household and the family, but she has to cope with the food emergency, the black-out, a stranger in her house and the necessity to feed him, and above all, she has also to deal with herself as an individual with individual fears. In spite of her calm acceptance of all this, she might--or must--have felt something deeper, like the need for being helpful and the awareness of war tragedies, and yet she has preserved her protective maternal role.

²⁴ Ibid., p.145.

Mrs Trowbridge's response was shared by several other women, as the reports for Mass-Observation confirm;²⁵ nevertheless, it cannot be denied that, in the broader picture of wartime, they constituted a "happy" minority. According to Sheridan's brief biographical note, Mrs Trowbridge had her son and her husband with her in Bradford; in addition, she did not have to work away from home--she probably belonged to a well-to-do family--and was educated: thus, her situation cannot be compared with the harder lives of women with husbands in the battlefields, children to be looked after and, among the less affluent, a need for money. She has a far higher standard of living than the large group of "city" women forced to evacuate to the countryside or small towns: indeed, war deepened the social gap as well as the city-country difference.

As is clearly shown by Muriel Green's diary for 1939, townsfolk were rather shocked by the impact of different habits showed by the evacuees, mainly women with children. In the following years the situation did not seem to change and villages and towns had to cope with the crowd sent from the cities. Apart from the modification in women's "public" life, this made even more striking the class differences existing between the two categories; in particular, with reference to war, it meant that the approach towards reality had perforce to be influenced by material conditions and to mirror two of the several "female" ways of experiencing the conflict. One was filled with the complaints about the "boredom" of country life by low-class women who felt the war as another of the calamities against the weaker part of society; the other reflected the attitude of women, who--in the main--did not need to work away from home, unless they really wished it. This second category provided the voluntary jobs required by the presence of the evacuees or by the simple needs of the soldiers; therefore, these jobs mainly implied knitting, nursing, taking care of children: in a word, all typically female tasks, which seemed neither to add much to the fixed roles willingly accepted nor to the growth of a "proper" female awareness of the significance and of the implications of war. It is worth underlining that as early as 1940 among some female members of Mass-Observation there was an awareness of this double side in female approaches to the acute,

²⁵ See the chapter *M-O Report No.26: Women in Wartime, January 1940*, *ibid.*, pp.73-8.

far-reaching problems provoked by the conflict. As Stella Schofield, in a report for Mass-Observation, pointed out:

Evacuation and Reception have set up dislocations in family life which are psychic as well as physical, and the woman in the street is beginning to think there is a lot to be said for 'sticking together the same as we did last time'. Yet, she accepts the war as an inevitable event...Underline, deepsearching effects can be judged by the remarks of a working class woman who said: "I used to believe in God?, but now I don't know I'm sure. Look at a man like Hitler. It does seem we've got to have a war." This is the type of woman, unattached to any organisation, at the mercy of rising prices and the hazards of employment...who is bearing the brunt of this home-front war, and this largely is the fatalistic spirit in which she bears it.²⁶

On the other hand, there were women's organisations where the members revealed themselves to be more consciously critical and aware of war processes. In the December bulletin of the Women's Freedom League mentioned by Schofield, we read that "women as responsible citizens are taking a big share in the work of civil defence": indeed, this was the way by which middle-class women decided to contribute actively to the struggle. On the opposite side, there were working-class women who worked in order to fulfil their and their children's basic needs; a further group of women involved in tasks and jobs of enormous relevance was constituted by the women's sections of the forces.

b. The war factories

During 1941 the Government policy about war work shifted from the appeal to a voluntary basis to an almost compulsory "recruitment", following increased shortages of labour. First women aged between twenty and twenty-one were asked to register at Labour Exchanges for war work; then, the measure was extended to women up to forty, while at the

²⁶ Ibid., p.72.

same time the National Service Office was put in charge of the planning. Almost the entire female work force was employed in the factories and in the support services of the military, such as vital munitions industries. Mass-Observation carried out a survey of war factories, the efficiency of the industry and the part played in that efficiency by the morale of workers, especially of female workers. The first interesting point regards the social class involved in the production and there is no need to stress that almost all the women there belong to the working class. In fact, they would probably have gone out to work even without the war. The second point worth emphasising is the dedication to their tasks, even when it simply meant washing up the tea cups and the trays, since this was their way of showing their willingness to help. The atmosphere characterising work canteens and generally all sections of war industries was indeed another sign of those women's desire to make an active contribution. "We get a good laugh here and a bit of fun" was the remark by one of them to the Mass-Observation interviewer, who reports:

The women are usually very cheerful. They gossip all the time as they get on with things and help each other when anything is behind...They don't feel the work is too monotonous.²⁷

The cheerful atmosphere makes a strong contrast with the complaints of the evacuees, as well as with the indifference shown towards them by some women in the countryside. It seems to me that the main reason for this discrepancy lies in the difference of life conditions between middle and low classes, especially when the latter are set in a urban environment: these women, being already used to working, considered the contingencies of war the chance of seeing their labour finally acknowledged and rewarded. Paradoxically, although the difficulties of wartime were felt more by them than by anybody else on the home front, they were still able to find some positive aspects of the conflict.

²⁷ Ibid., p.164.

c. Women in the army

Joan Arkwright, a twenty-seven-year-old from Altrincham, joined the WAAF in 1943 and, at the same time, kept a diary for Mass-Observation, providing a first hand report which might be regarded as representative of women's experience on the battlefield. As mentioned above, from 1941 enrolment in the army became one of the main issues of the Government's policy, since--without being compulsory--it was strongly encouraged. The case of Joan, indeed, is that of a young woman who asked to volunteer in 1940 but was actually called up almost three years later, when it was needed. In the same way, many other women enrolled in the Auxiliary Territorial Service, the Women's Royal Naval Service and the Women's Auxiliary Air Service, offering themselves in the unusual role of soldiers. Unlike Italy, where "women warriors" like Agnese were rather exceptional figures, employed in the alternative troops of the partisans, Great Britain witnessed the rise and the spread of what I have called the Amazon archetype. Although they were not trained to use weapons, following either an established ideal of female peacefulness or a chivalrous, protective attitude towards the weaker sex, these women became real soldiers: the type of total conflict possessed by the Second World War had finally led them to take an active role inside the male zone of combat. Apart from the importance of this participation in the history of women, it is worth taking into account the psychological aspects and their influence in the development of independent female thought on war.

Joan Arkwright's diary appears to be a strange mixture of martial routine and feminine sensibility. The daily ritual described conforms to what would be expected by a male soldier:

...I was almost a model recruit. Anyhow I passed. After waiting twenty minutes or more the officer informed me I was accepted, asked me about my education...then she said, "Come back here at a quarter to two and we'll enrol you."...At last we were all shepherded downstairs and sworn in, and paid one day's pay plus a ration allowance, and given a few words of advice about the journey. I wonder how many of us realised the import of the statement we signed. It was not just another job, or a new experience, to be tackled thoughtlessly. We belong to the Armed Forces of the Crown. Loyalty to the Country and its

traditions should be the backbone of service. I hope I shall still feel like this after several months as a WAAF.²⁸

Nevertheless, her observations and remarks reflect a genuinely feminine frame of mind:

We got our kit during the afternoon. There was considerable hilarity when it came to trying the undies on in our hut--they weren't all the right size.²⁹

Throughout the period between 5th January and 3rd April, Joan underwent a sort of training--in some aspects comparable to that for male soldiers--which adjusted itself to the rhythm of a typical army life: waking up at 6 a. m. with the "sweet bugling issued from the loudspeaker", breakfasting at 7, then ordinary tasks (make the bed, attend first aid lectures, prepare for the parade, etc.), and feeling more and more involved in the activities specifically planned for the girls. Yet her diary records all the trivial gestures which reminded the Mass-Observation readers of the particular soldier writing it and by which she must have reminded herself of being a young woman. So it happens that under the same date she puts together different kinds of statements, as in this case:

I do loathe first aid lectures. I listen hard and try to remember all the advice but the description of some of the wounds is nauseating. I have a lovely green silk kimono to wear for my tango. I pressed it in the wash hut and hung it out so as not to crush it. The hut NCO will put it in her bunk tomorrow as it can't be around during hut inspection.³⁰

In fact, from her remarks about dresses, cosy rooms ("Avril's bedroom is cosy, modern furniture, an Indian rug")³¹, meals out and conversations with friends and other recruits, Joan appears to represent the perfect integration of female figures inside the mechanism regulating

²⁸ Ibid., p.182.

²⁹ Ibid., p.183.

³⁰ p.185.

³¹ Ibid.

the functions of male zones; yet this did not imply, for her, the loss of typically feminine qualities, which, far from being rejected or underestimated, kept their weight in her personality. It seems to me that, thanks to the balance found between herself and the demands of war, Joan--and presumably also many others like her--demonstrated a female need for and capability of facing the conflict in the best possible way.

3.5 *Pane nero*: the Second World War and Italian women

In *Pane nero* Mafai looks in retrospect at women's war experience in Italy, analysing it from the point of view of a woman writer who is also trying to outline the steps towards female emancipation. The work consists of the testimonies collected through interviews, diaries and letters referring to the Second World War; unlike Sheridan's anthology, the author has not confined herself to the role of attentive "collector", but has chosen to tell other women's stories through her own restless voice. As a result, *Pane nero* is a continuous narrative, a sort of novel reflecting separate--yet parallel--stories of several female characters told by one of them. Nevertheless, the text possesses several features which make it comparable to the above Mass-Observation anthology: first of all, they both deal with the female side of the total conflict; secondly, both emphasise the increasingly relevant parts played by women to save their countries; last but not least, they both portray war as a crucial moment when women became aware of their possibilities inside male zones, growing in some cases a strong attachment towards their jobs and tasks outside their homes. According to Mafai, the Italian home front witnessed as many tragic struggles as the wide battlefield; indeed, many, crucial "fights to the finish" took place inside the houses, in the factories, in the countryside, always under the constant threat of raids. Protagonists of this struggle were women, who did not fight for glory and honour--values which in a male, "virile" mentality usually accompany the longing for "being useful to the country"--but out of sheer necessity, to protect and feed their children, to support, morally and materially, their men away on the battlefield. It cannot be denied that, even if Britain showed a similar strength in the brave

actions and attitudes of her women, Italy saw a harder female situation during the conflict, since the country's war history followed its own peculiar tracks. For instance, the absolute need for food and the lack of flavour and basic ingredients led women to develop a series of "individual strategies": to cope with their families' necessities, they learnt how to take advantage of the Black Market, which was much more widespread in Italy than in Britain. Yet, it is worth underlining that, in spite of different circumstances, women in both countries revealed some similarities in their approach to war and, above all, they started to grow independent minds as a result of their forced entry into the male zone. An analysis of the testimonies contained in *Pane nero* will enable the above similarities to be detailed, contributing to a deeper understanding of female thought in wartime inside the boundaries of Western civilisation.

3.6 From passivity to involvement

The first chapter of *Pane nero* starts with "10th Jun. 1940, 5 p.m." ³², the date of Italy's entrance into the war. In the first line of the last chapter we find the date constituting the end of the author's reconstruction:

On 1st May 1945 all towns and cities in Northern Italy celebrate together workers' day and liberation day.³³

The period taken into account in the text--between 1940 and 1945--represents the years of Italy's participation in war. Italy's late entrance into the conflict accounts for the first difference between the Italian and British approach to war: while British women--at least some of them--were preoccupied with the Munich Crisis in 1938 and were fearfully expecting the outburst of the conflict, Italian women did not have the chance of maturing a similar kind of expectation. Moreover, war was at the beginning presented by Fascism as an easy battle with little human loss and no sacrifices, with the aim of conferring on Italy the status of great

³² Edition as cited above (note 2, p.70), p.7.

³³ Ibid., p.262: Il Primo maggio del 1945 in tutte le città del nord si celebrano insieme la festa del Lavoro e quella della Liberazione.

political power in Europe. For this reason, the Government did not find it necessary to plan any defence strategy comparable to the evacuation schemes or the distribution of gas-masks in Britain. Hence, we might suppose that women underestimated the gravity of the situation, and the sudden realisation of the real face of war was a terrible nightmare.

Assunta was married to an employee of the TERNI; she used to live in Montorio on the mountains thirty km. from Teramo, where a new hydroelectric power-station was under construction. "We were a group of happy young wives; we used to do the housework all day, to cook meals, to do some embroidering then in the evening we went out to wait for our husbands who finished working at five o'clock. We did the same even on that day. It was my husband who told me that war had broken out. And all of us women didn't answer. We didn't know what to say. No, we didn't expect war at all."³⁴

None of them seemed to react as Miss French did for Mass-Observation, since the percentage of women with political awareness was very low. Probably, only the wives and lovers of important Fascist officials could suspect that something was going on.

The time fixed by destiny has arrived: that is the moment of the final resolution...the crucial decision, the irrevocable decision has been taken...we are taking the field against the reactionary plutocratic democracies of Western Europe which have always prevented the march and often menaced the life of the Italian people.³⁵

This delirious rhetoric, by which Mussolini announced Italy's entry into the war, accounts for the general atmosphere dominating Italy at the outburst of the conflict. Women's reaction

³⁴ Ibid., p. 10: Assunta era la moglie di un impiegato della TERNI; viveva a Montorio, una trentina di km. da Teramo verso la montagna, dove si stava impiantando una nuova centrale idroelettrica. "Eravamo un gruppo di giovani spose, eravamo contente, tutto il giorno lavoravamo in casa, preparavamo dei bei pranzetti, ricamavamo, e poi la sera andavamo tutte assieme incontro ai mariti che uscivano dall'ufficio alle cinque. Così facemmo anche quel giorno. Me lo disse mio marito che era scoppiata la guerra. E rimanemmo tutte zitte. Non sapevamo che dire. No, la guerra noi non ce l'aspettavamo affatto.

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 12-3: Un' ora segnata dal Destino sta per scoccare sul quadrante della Storia, l'ora delle decisioni irrevocabili...la storica decisione, la decisione irrevocabile è presa...Scendiamo in campo contro le democrazie plutocratiche e reazionarie dell'Occidente, che in ogni tempo hanno ostacolato la marcia e spesso insidiato l'esistenza del popolo italiano...

was multifarious: as we have seen, some of them did not know much about politics; some others shared the excitement manifested by men. According to Mafai, very few of them expressed concern about the tragic side of the conflict. Notwithstanding this, there was a small minority who regarded war as the beginning of positive change: undoubtedly, they thought, war would mean the collapse of the Fascist regime. Adele Bei, jailed as anti-fascist, wrote to her daughter from Perugia's prison:

My dearest Angelina, after my terrible experience of the last six years I have learnt to be patient and think positively about the future. I'm sure the future will bring us joy, especially we will be able to see each other again and live together for ever... We will take an active part in the work, doing jobs that, despised by other people, are really satisfying for us.³⁶

In the first three months after the declaration of war, Italy witnessed a positive development of the conflict, which appeared to bring simply a series of successes. But in the autumn something started to change slowly: men's mobilisation had enrolled two million soldiers, a small figure compared to the real need, because it was difficult to equip a larger number. This first difficulty--i.e. to provide weapons--was faced by the Government by asking the people to collect any kind of metal, a hardly popular measure. Indeed, although the aim was easily achieved, in that moment women realised that war meant sacrifice, since they had even to give away their pots. However, this was not yet the time for women to develop the extraordinary courage shown in the hardest moments of war, and none of them seemed to think that they would write an important page of Italian history. We do not have any literary testimonies by Italian women written in that period, since it appears that the material concerning the female response to war has been written in retrospect. Consequently, this implies that they did not consider writing a means by which to make their contribution. In spite of age differences, Italian women apparently manifested at the outbreak of the war a

³⁶ Ibid., pp.15-6: Angelina mia tanto cara! L'esperienza dei sei lunghi anni di questa triste vita mi ha insegnato tante tante cose e fra le tante quella di avere pazienza e grande fiducia nell'avvenire. Senza dubbio il nostro avvenire ci regalerà tante gioie, ma la più grande sarà quella di rivederci e vivere sempre uniti...Prenderemo parte attiva al lavoro, a quel lavoro che tanti disprezzano mentre a noi dà un mondo di soddisfazioni.

shared attitude of unawareness and impotency. According to Mafai, the main reason for this passive attitude lay in the limited amount of women's emancipation in Italian society. Following the most male-chauvinist archetypes, Fascist ideology celebrated the traditional archetype of quiet mothers and housewives, uneducated and totally subject to male authority, regarded as simple instruments of the demographic development of the country:

Everything was under control. Everyone knew exactly what he or she must and must not do. There were people who gave orders and people who took them. Wives obeyed their husbands. Husbands obeyed their bosses... There were no strikes. Trains arrived on time. Everyone took orders from the Duce. Above him there was only God. Everything was under control. But all this was bound to finish with the war.³⁷

The picture emerging from Mafai's acute arguments outlines a radically different panorama from the British one: the outbreak of the war witnessed a general female passive response to it (apart from the very few cases of politically involved women); apparently, no Italian woman showed an awareness comparable to that of Miss French from Glasgow; no Mrs Hamilton could start taking care of other mothers' children, i. e. of soldiers and evacuee children; no young Muriel could report on the "indecent customs of women from cities". Yet this acquiescent attitude was bound to change radically in the very first war winter; indeed, under the terrible circumstances created by the conflict, Italian women would overcome their traditional submissive behaviour to develop the unexpected bravery which led them to play an important role in the war. Silently, and almost without realising it, they would fight their personal battles against poverty, famine, cold, bombardments and, in some cases, the enemy troops.

³⁷ Ibid., p.42: Tutto era ordinato. Si sapeva esattamente ciò che si doveva fare. C'era chi comandava e chi obbediva. La moglie obbediva al marito; Il marito obbediva al capufficio... Non c'erano scioperi; i treni arrivavano in orario. Tutti obbedivano al Duce. E sopra il Duce c'era solo Dio. Tutto era ordinato. Tutto questo sarebbe finito con la guerra.

3.7 Cities and countryside

The contrast between country life and city life acquired in Italy a peculiar quality, springing essentially from the fact that the country could provide the food needed by the cities. It was after food rationing was imposed in 1941 that the relationship between urban and country life became closer.

In Montorio you could find flavour, eggs, pork. But after we moved to Terni things got more and more difficult. Bread was bad, grey and wet. I was starving in that period also because I was expecting my first child.³⁸

This anonymous testimony reported by the author for the year 1941 indicates that in small villages it was easier to get food than in bigger towns and cities. In the urban markets after 1941 women showed an aggressive behaviour which marked the shift from acquiescence to anger: there was no food, the rations imposed by the Government were inadequate and the only way to get something to survive was to buy on the Black Market. The Black Market acted as a link between countryside and cities, since peasants, smugglers and dissenters used to bring there all they could sell. As Mafai stresses:

The peasants realised how hungry the cities were, so they thought to bring the cities oil, ham, sausages, cheese. So it happened that in all big cities in Italy a parallel trade of agricultural product started; women were the leading figures of this trade.³⁹

Compared to the contrast between urban and country life in Britain, the Italian one was much more "material" and, instead of emphasising two different aspects of female

³⁸ Ibid., p. 86: A Montorio si trovava ancora la farina, le uova, il maiale. Ma quando venimmo trasferiti a Terni, le cose si fecero più difficili. Il pane era cattivo: grigio, umido. Io avevo molta fame in quel periodo perchè aspettavo il mio primo bambino.

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 92-3: A loro volta i contadini si rendono conto rapidamente, nel corso della contrattazione individuale, di quanto la città abbia fame. Si offrono quindi di venire essi stessi a portare in città l'olio, il prosciutto, le salsicce, la ricotta. Si crea così in tutte le grandi città italiane una rete parallela di commercializzazione dei prodotti agricoli, che, a tutti i suoi snodi essenziali, ha delle donne come protagoniste.

behaviour, it simply stated the fact that the countryside offered more chances of surviving in wartime; but again women acted the chief roles also in this case. Able to develop their own strategies, in order to feed their families, women from the cities learnt to recognise all women from the countryside who brought food hidden with them. A relationship based on complicity was established between them from 1941-42, when the food crisis became bigger. The exchange procession between country and city began from the cities: city-women from Rome, Milan, Naples, Turin simply had to catch a train or a bus to find the countryside after a very few kilometres. There they could buy eggs, potatoes, lettuce, a bottle of oil and go back home. After a while, it was women from the countryside who directed the selling: not only did they go to the cities, taking their supplies with them, but they organised sales chains: a Black Market seller preferred to give ten kilos to one customer instead of one kilo each to ten customers. Therefore the first customer who could afford to buy ten kilos was accepted, and had nine kilos to sell herself. In this way from both sides women collaborated to establish an alternative system of exchange and distribution of primary goods.

On the other hand, as in Britain, the countryside saw the arrival of evacuees from the urban centres, although it was a spontaneous movement under the threat of bomb attacks. No evacuation had been planned, as in Britain, so there was no question of being forced to move or to accept evacuees by law. The relationship between countryfolk and evacuees originated from the bases of mutual help and exchange of every kind, especially between women: after an initial diffident approach, they realised they might obtain something useful from the other side, something which was not necessarily an item bought with money. Sometimes, the woman evacuated from the cities possessed a precious object that her "landlady" had never seen: a silk scarf, a necklace, jewellery or whatever, which could be exchanged for food. The primitive exchange had replaced the evolved system of purchase and sale. It cannot be denied that, compared to the cities, the country communities represented a sort of privileged people, although privation and sacrifices were a heavy burden also for them. Apparently, the low and middle classes had to face a more difficult situation than in Britain, where food shortage was not as catastrophic as in Italy.

Women from the cities, as well as from the countryside, were forced to develop courage and personal resources to help their children and themselves to survive. The strength and bravery they all showed during the bombardments, which occurred with high frequency and devastating consequences, especially from 1941 onwards, make a strong contrast with the unawareness and complete lack of any political consciousness they revealed at the outbreak of the war. Palermo, Naples, Rome, Florence, Milan, and other cities had to cope with air raids every day and sometimes even more than once a day: people rushed outside on hearing the alarms, to gather in the shelters. An anonymous woman who lived that terrible experience reported to Mafai her memory:

There was nothing left, no timetables, no routine. Our only thought was: what about the alarm tonight? Is it going off or not? Food became our dominating preoccupation. During the day we had to look for food during the night for a refuge.⁴⁰

According to Mafai, women were the "pillars" of this family routine turned upside down by war and in need of a new organisation, and new rules. So, forgetting their traditional "weakness" and submission (which were the main issues of the Fascist propaganda promoting the old, archetyped image of the woman-prolific mother and obedient wife), women demonstrated that they possessed all the requirements for facing difficulties and surviving the war. It might be difficult to outline what their thoughts were during and about the conflict; presumably, they were too busy taking care of their families and themselves and did not have time to reflect. Their reaction was postponed until after the end of the war, yet, in the mean time, most of them acted as perfect interpreters of the difficult roles history had assigned to them: in their brave daily experience, Italian women conferred on the old archetypes of mothers, daughters, wives and fiancées of soldiers the unsuspected resources of their exceptional moral strength.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.123: Non esisteva più nulla, nè orari nè niente. L'unico pensiero che avevamo era: che fa, stasera la sirena? Suona o non suona? E ' il nostro pensiero dominante, piano piano, diventò il cibo. Di giorno bisognava cercare da mangiare, di notte bisognava cercare un rifugio.

3.8 Codes of behaviour in wartime: fashion and decency

At the end of May 1941, Pope Pius XII started a campaign against the increasing "indecent" of women's customs; he complained about "immodest fashion", short dresses, new types of dances and so on which were not at all suitable for Christian young women. The Pope's complaints were "in tune" with the backward Fascist ideal of female perfection, as we read in the magazine *Critica fascista*:

I am not speaking about a revival of women's slavery....I simply wish a slowing down of the excessive freedom given to women nowadays. There is no equality between men and women...⁴¹

The deep gap between this retrograde attitude and the open mentality demonstrated by British people in their comments about female admission to public houses underlines once again the exceptional quality of the active part played by Italian women during the conflict. It goes without saying that the falling apart of fixed codes in behaviour was to arouse a polemic; nevertheless, the debate seemed to involve just external observers--significantly enough, all male--and not women, who were concerned about surviving and relatively uninterested in trivial matters such as the length of their skirts. In this regard, apparently, there was no female reaction to the Pope's appeals and the following rules imposed by law: first of all in 1941 women were forbidden to wear trousers; then women clerks were not allowed to put on make-up and clingy dresses. Behind this absurd campaign to preserve "purity", there was hidden the signal of a change in female habits and female self-consideration. Apart from the fact that the above rules did not apply to high class women (who could wear anything they liked, especially when playing sports), it was true that dresses were getting shorter and shorter and women were not really abiding by the rules; yet the real reason is to be found in the shortage of material for tailoring and in the female awareness of the absolute triviality of such matters. Ignoring both the Church's requests and the appeals from every kind of female

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 36: Io non auspico...un ritorno alla schiavitù femminile, ma soltanto...un freno alla esagerata libertà di cui godono oggidi le donne: fra i due sessi non può esistere parità di diritti....

magazine, women showed a pragmatic approach to the reality of war, limiting their efforts and concerns to the search for food and the daily struggle to survive.

By repressing women's freedom through the above prohibitions, the authorities attempted to conceal their real matter of concern, represented by the imperceptible yet relentless changes in women's behaviour: too many of them had already started to work or to apply for jobs; too many girls were allowed to spend time alone with their boyfriends. As in Britain women had discovered the exciting freedom to go to pubs alone or with female friends, in Italy young women could count on their mothers' indulgence and be out late. As Mafai points out,

Some old, strict rules were guaranteed in the family by the presence of the father, who was the one who had the last word. Now, in most cases, the task of saying yes or no had been deferred to the mother. Very often they dithered: be strict or be indulgent were two possible attitudes in wartime.⁴²

3.9 Women and work

My mother and my grandmother had worked as hospital nurses during the First World War. I was a child then, but they used to take me with them when there was no school to give some help. I was forty when the war broke out. I didn't have children and I thought it was right to make my contribution and help those who needed it. My husband was an engineer and had a small factory, so that he was exempt from the army. I started to work in hospital...then we left to assist the soldiers wounded on the Russian front. It was a very sad but good experience at the same time. We considered ourselves soldiers and it was true indeed... I did my duty. I can say I fought during the war, and I actually did it.⁴³

⁴² Ibid., p.113: Certe regole di antica severità erano garantite in casa dalla presenza dei padri, cui spettava sempre l'ultima parola. Ora, spesso, sono le madri che devono dire sì o no. E spesso si sentono divise: maggiore severità o maggiore indulgenza sono due risposte ugualmente possibili e giuste in tempo di guerra.

⁴³ Ibid., p.63: Già mia madre e mia nonna avevano lavorato negli ospedali nel corso della Prima guerra mondiale. Io ero ancora bambina, ma mi portavano nelle ore libere dalla scuola a fare un po' di assistenza.

This testimony collected by Mafai reveals one of the many examples of female war-work in Italy as in the rest of Europe. As we have already seen, the same happened in Britain. Governments and authorities either encouraged or allowed female entrance into the working process, since the compelling necessities overwhelmed any kind of old fashioned prejudices against women workers. In this regard, it is worth underlining that while in Britain this fact provoked debates but was in a sense "in the air" (although many women regarded their war activities as temporary, most of them decided to continue working afterwards), in Italy it came all of a sudden and was apparently against the previous "trends" dominating Fascist society. The anonymous witness reports, in the above passage, about voluntary nursing on the borders of the battlefields, an activity which had been consigned to women since the early ages. On the other hand, Mafai points out that women also found such other "male jobs and tasks" as work in war factories, tilling, delivering mail, driving trains and buses, and so on.

We might suppose that similar situations appeared also in other countries, and the case of Italy simply confirms it. Nevertheless, it is worth underlining that the impact of women's work in a nation still imbued with all kinds of male-chauvinist prejudices represented a more striking phenomenon than in Britain and caused a deep change in mentality and in social structure. In fact, despite the obvious differences among the various regions and geographical cultural contexts,⁴⁴ the Second World War marked a decisive step forward in the process of women's emancipation. Probably, this development would have started later and would have been less effective had it not been for the war. Mafai emphasises this aspect:

Avevo già quasi quaranta anni quando scoppiò la guerra. Non avevo figli e mi sembrava giusto dare il mio contributo, aiutare coloro che avevano bisogno di noi. Mio marito era ingegnere e dirigeva una piccola fabbrica, così fu esonerato dal servizio militare...Io ripresi i miei turni in ospedale...Siamo partite per andare a raccogliere i nostri feriti sul fronte russo...Fu una cosa molto triste e molto bella insieme. Noi ci consideravamo tutte militari e di fatto lo eravamo...Il mio dovere l'ho fatto anch'io. Posso proprio dire di averla fatta anch'io, la guerra, nel vero senso della parola.

⁴⁴ In Italian history, from the sixteenth century to nowadays, the economic and social development of Northern and Southern regions has followed completely different patterns, the consequences of which are still visible today. This fact constitutes an undeniable truth in the making of Italian history and culture, as appears from both effective observation and the large number of critical works on the subject. See for instance, Rosario Villari *Il sud nella storia d'Italia* (Bari: Laterza, 1982).

The Fascists had never been too keen on women workers, they had never appreciated women dedicated to study and longing for a good profession. Speaking to a French interviewer, Mussolini had admitted: "Several women are compelled by financial difficulties to work outside. Yet, their proper task is to be wives and mothers. The only place for women today as well as in the past is at home."⁴⁵

It goes without saying that wartime necessities forced those holding these old-fashioned ideas to keep up with the times. Despite everything, employers were willing to give jobs to women, since their wages were half those of the men's but they were performing similar tasks. In war factories all women were classified and paid under the label of "female workers"; in agriculture they were paid less than boys; in shops they could be sacked at any time because they had not signed any contract; in schools they could teach Italian but not philosophy, and so on. At least, these were the prescriptions and rules imposed by the regime, which nevertheless had to turn a blind eye to the frequent breaches brought about by the present circumstances. In 1941, Italy registered massive engagement of women in all kinds of services:

My husband left among the first soldiers as a tankman and I, although only twenty years old, already had a baby girl. Then I decided to apply for a job in the tram-car company, both because I needed money, and because I wanted to do something by myself. When my husband Franco learnt it, he bit my head off, but eventually he accepted my decision...Driving the tram was really satisfying. I remember there was a ticket-collector telling me off all the time because I didn't wear the work-cap. Once, when I saw him wait for me at the tram-stop, I stopped the tram, got off, put the cap on the rails and walked on it...of course he reported me for insolence.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ *Pane nero*, p.53: Ai fascisti non erano mai piaciute le donne lavoratrici, così come non apprezzavano le donne che studiavano e pretendevano di esercitare una professione. "Riconosco", aveva confidato Mussolini a una giornalista francese che lo intervistava, "che molte donne si trovano sotto la pressione di difficili condizioni economiche e sono per conseguenza obbligate a cercare un lavoro fuori della propria casa. Ma il loro vero compito è soprattutto quello di,spose e di madri. Il vero posto della donna, nella società moderna, è come nel passato, nella casa."

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.50-1: Mio marito partì tra i primi come carrista e io, benchè avessi soltanto vent'anni, avevo già una figlia. Un po' perchè i soldi non bastavano, un po' perchè avevo voglia di fare qualcosa per conto mio,

This is the memory told to Mafai by Lucia, who as a young woman worker refused to hide her long blonde hair. The author mentions some more examples: Carla, who was employed as a postman in 1941 and spoke about her experience as "something which cheered her up, letting her have a chat with people"; Adriana, a twenty-three-year-old girl, who started work as a shop assistant and had the chance to walk to and fro alone; and many other women employed in the fields, especially in the Pianura Padana, since the entire agricultural production was consigned to women.

Even important industries such as Fiat, Pirelli and Falk (the first two producing pneumatic tyres, and the other steel) had to employ women, although without a proper contract. To all this we might add the host of housewives who kept on working on a voluntary base at home, accomplishing traditional female wartime tasks such as knitting and tailoring. In brief, war forced women to modify their routine, take decisions and discover in themselves bravery and enterprise. Above all, war touched some secret chords, like a longing for novelty and adventure. Unlike in Britain, the Italian Government did not promote any auxiliary women corps in the army, although there were some requests for this: a seventeen-year-old girl from a Northern province wrote a letter to the Duce asking him to let her be conscripted:

I'd be a real, proud woman if I could leave for the battlefield and defend our beautiful, great Italy. I'm angry with myself because I'm a woman. I could have been much happier as a man.⁴⁷

fatto sta che decisi di entrare all'Azienda del tram. Quando mio marito Franco lo seppe andò su tutte le furie, ma alla fine accettò la mia decisione....Guidare il tram...ah, guidare il tram era una bella soddisfazione. Mi ricordo di un controllore che non mi dava pace perchè io non portavo mai il berretto. un giorno quando l'ho visto da lontano che mi aspettava al chiosco, ho fermato il tram, sono scesa, ho messo il berretto sulle rotaie e ci sono passata sopra...Si capisce che lui poi mi ha fatto rapporto.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p.60: Mi sentirei una vera donna orgogliosa se potessi andare anch'io a difendere la nostra bella e grande Italia. Mi invidio [sic] me stessa per essere donna. Chissà quanto sarei stata più felice essendo nata uomo.

However, Italian girls were not allowed to be combatants: war was still a man's matter, requiring a uniform, training, shared life, going away, fights, facing the enemy. On the other hand, Italian women were requested to go Germany, to be employed in war factories, although the number of unemployed men working in lagers was higher.

In conclusion, even if there was less planning and organisation than in Great Britain, Italy witnessed women's involvement in every field of production activities during the Second World War. Although in most cases the aftermath saw their return to traditional female tasks at home, it cannot be denied that a considerable number of women wished and managed to have a permanent job. This change in mentality could not be stopped, and the tragedy of war, against all odds, contained some unconfessed positive aspects in women's eyes. Female participation was a widespread phenomenon, from the heroic gestures of women's partisans like Agnese to the apparently less "brave" anonymous women whose contribution to war was of fundamental importance. The well-established female archetypes taken from ancient *epos* seem to have grown into mature women, both retaining some archetypal features and developing a new, modern approach to war.

Conclusion

In the mass is the one
In the thousand drowned,
In the hundred shot,
In the five crashed,
Is the one.
Over the news
Falls the shadow
Of the one.
We cannot weep
At tragedy for millions
But for one.
In the mind
For the mind's life
The one lives on.¹

This poem by Ida Procter is emblematically entitled *The One* and testifies to the undeniable truth that behind women's written works and records about war--in this case, the Second World War--always lie dramatic fragments of personal war tragedies. As Sappho had

¹ Reilly, p.102.

beautifully and effectively said in her well-known lyric quoted in the Introduction, women have generally been concerned much more with their feelings--love towards their men, their families and their children above all--than with great but rather intangible ideals such as honour, heroism, bravery. The perennial value of such typically "feminine" qualities--self-sacrifice, abnegation, maternal care--has been shown during the development of our history in a long series of famous and obscure deeds which fill our common imagination. This is the reason why the female archetypes I have referred to seem to retain irrefutable validity until contemporary times. Far from emphasising the fixity of the old male-chauvinist attitude characterising a large part of the Western frame of mind, the qualities and the feminine features above-mentioned, in my opinion, assert women's strength and moral greatness rather than their supposed subjection to male aspects and ideals.

A striking as well as unsuspected consequence of the Second World War character of "totality" has been women's assertion of their intelligence and capacities, which enabled them to live the conflict both as tragedy and as a means to demonstrate their qualities. Although this second element might apparently be regarded as secondary to the human loss and destruction caused by war, in the long term, it has helped women on their way to emancipation. Through the testimonies I have taken into account, it is clear that both in Britain and in Italy the circumstances of war gave strong support to women's entry in the working field. Even if this process had started already during and after the Great War, it was with the second conflict and its terrible aftermath that it proceeded towards rapid and unremitting development, not only in more "modern" countries like Britain but also in more conservative societies like Italy.

A further feature worth underlining is the active female participation in martial enterprises: in Britain this assumed the well-planned structures of volunteering and conscription, in Italy the heroic features of fighting and dying in the anonymous troops of the partisans. Together with those extreme forms, women's involvement in war has meant their working away from home in all kinds of jobs, their careful care of sons and parents under the menace of enemy attacks, their feeding and clothing of children and elderly people, their exploiting of all possible resources.

During the frantic activities of wartime, women had also the chance of reflecting about themselves and the roles which they had been playing in society and which they were determined to play afterwards. Although some of them, in Britain, Italy and presumably in the rest of Europe and in the United States, wanted to revert to their established places of "angels in the house", a large majority preferred to have a job outside. War had provided them, especially the younger generation, with self-esteem and self-assurance that now they were eager to demonstrate and employ for their own sake and for the sake of society.

As a last point, I should mention the increasing awareness of intellectual power felt by women: the Second World War, carrying on a process which had started with the First, offered them the possibility--normally given more to male intellectuals than to female--to express their thoughts and personal opinions, especially about war itself, through written words: the menace to collective security, the sense of precariousness which deeply characterised wartime, has induced women also to consider seriously the meaning of their own existence. For it is true that in the face of something as destructive as war--something able to destroy even the act of "thinking" itself--the problem remains the significance one must confer on things. In this regard, it is worth stressing that the "personal" war described and commented on by a woman writer in the above lyric, *The One*, is accompanied by other female poets' views on war as a common destiny of violence and destruction for the whole of mankind. The claim of intellectual participation in history has been expressed by some female authors, who have become universal consciences and "voices" of human sorrow--tasks which, apart from a few exceptions, have been traditionally confined to the male sphere. Emblematic of this intellectual growth are some examples of literary productions in which women expressed their opinions and sentiments on war as a common tragedy rather than as a collection of individual dramas. In poems like *Auschwitz*,² *No Need for Nuremberg*,³

² Elizabeth Wyse, in Reilly, p.129.

³ Erica Marx, in Reilly, p.86.

Hiroshima,⁴ British women writers manifested the development of female concern about major issues linked with war; on the Italian side, an analogous attitude found its representative in Elsa Morante's song, *Canzone finale della stella gialla detta pure La carlottina*, where the famous writer condemned the Nazi persecution of the Jews.⁵

My conclusion is to ascribe to women's merit the strength and the bravery they have shown during the Second World War as well as their making of that "performance" the beginning of their new route inside society and its codes. Nevertheless, in my opinion women are still aware of their "life-givers" role which, generally speaking, renders them messengers and supporters of peace in the face of war and violence.

⁴ Mary Beadnell, in Reilly, p.15.

⁵ In *Il mondo salvato dai ragazzini* (Torino: Einaudi), pp. 215-20.

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